

MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE

AUGUST, 1925

Vol. LXXXV

NUMBER 3

The Price of Curiosity

A COMPLETE NOVELETTE—A STORY OF THE DANGEROUS
BORDERLAND BETWEEN TWO DIFFERENT SOCIAL
WORLDS IN NEW YORK

By L. M. Hussey

STELLA BERESFORD stood at the outer door of her apartment, an eager hand on the knob. In the corridor she heard a clang of the elevator, and immediately afterward, approaching footsteps. The beat of these grew louder, and then slackened before her door. Quickly she turned the knob, flung the door open, and confronted a young man about to ring.

He started back in surprise, at once glimpsed Stella's laughing face, and in the next second seized her hands and kissed her. She struggled out of his embrace.

"You ought to be ashamed, Mr. Sterling Elliot! Every one can see us!"

Elliot looked up and down the empty corridor, and then into the vestibule, where Stella had retreated.

"I don't see the crowd, Stella!"

"Well, maybe you don't, but somebody might have been watching. You're not going to stand outside, are you, Sterling?"

"No—I believe I will come in."

They both laughed.

Elliot followed the girl into the hall, and then to the living room. A man a little past middle age was seated near the table, reading. On the young man's entrance he rose, smiling, his hand extended.

"Good evening, Mr. Beresford," said Elliot.

They shook hands, Stella's father and the young man, and then began to chat. Toward Elliot there was just a touch of smiling condescension in old Beresford's manner, as if he were talking to a lad still in his early teens. This was natural, almost unavoidable, for as a boy Elliot had grown up in the little Virginia town where, until this winter, the Beresfords had also had their home. It did not matter that Elliot had left for college, graduated from law school, settled in New York, and practiced there for several years. It was no

matter that he was now an assistant district attorney, with excellent prospects of further promotion within a few years. To Beresford he was still a boy.

While the two men talked, Stella slipped from the room, to return very quickly, wearing a wrap and ready for the street.

"I'm ready, Sterling!"

Beresford held out his hand to Stella's *fiancé*, the same amused smile curving his lips.

"I'll say good night now, Sterling," he declared. "If you're going to the theater, I'll probably be in bed when you bring Stella back. You children keep later hours than I care to."

"Papa annoys me so much!" cried the girl, with a half petulant frown. "He acts as if he was still in our little old home town, with nothing more to look at than a dry goods store, a grocery, and a garage. I can't make him see that here you don't really have to have anywhere to go—it's fascinating just to walk through the streets!"

"I'll let you do all the walking with Sterling," answered her father. "I didn't come to the city for exercise. The fact is, Sterling, I came because this child began to make life a burden to me. She plagued me so much to take an apartment in New York for the winter that I had to yield. It was the only way to get peace!"

Impetuously Stella put her arms about her father in a warm embrace.

"You were just a dear!" she cried.

Even Elliot was amused by her naïveté. As they went down in the elevator, he kept smiling at her much as Beresford had been smiling at him a few minutes earlier. Momentarily, however, she was preoccupied. She did not glance up at Elliot's face until they reached the street.

"What are you grinning about, Sterling?" she inquired.

"About you, Stella."

"I must be very amusing!"

"You are. It delights me to see you so pleased with all your new toys." From the corner an empty taxi was approaching. "Shall I hail this cab?" suggested Elliot.

"No, it's not very far, and I'd much rather walk. Now listen, Sterling, dear! It's awfully good to be near you again, and you are a nice sort of plaything; but I don't want you to get papa's idea and begin to think I'm just a feather-brained child. This wonderful big city is a whole

lot more than a toy to me. It's life, every bit of life, packed into these crowded streets. No, I don't want you to smile. I'm perfectly serious. I'm absolutely certain that you don't have to go out of these streets, perhaps not out of this very neighborhood, to see every kind of life there is in this world, every kind of human being, and every kind of emotion. You can't understand how it fascinates me, Sterling. I'm just hungry to see everything there is to see!"

Her gray eyes, catching up the glow of street lights, glinted with eager, yellow fires. Elliot looked into her face and nodded, now a bit gravely.

"That's true, Stella. Life concentrates itself here. You don't have to go far to see great slices of it. The trouble is that a glimpse of many of these slices wouldn't do you much good. We see plenty of that sort on exhibition up at our office."

The girl seemed eagerly to watch his lips. It was almost as if she wanted to guess his words before he spoke them. She began to speak rapidly.

"You don't understand me, Sterling. I want to see everything. The things you think ought to be hidden from me are just the things I want to see. You could show me so much! Some day I'm going to come up to your office, and you'll have to put some sort of a screen there, so that I can hide behind it and peep out at all the strange people that are brought in to you. You must have places to hide there. Don't you have two or three *Sherlocks* tucked away in every closet? I've simply got to get a peep at all the fascinating murderers and gunmen and bigamists and Bolsheviks you deal with every day!"

Elliot laughed.

"We don't exactly catch a murderer every hour, Stella. Business is a little dull sometimes."

She laughed with him, but almost at once her face was gravely eager once more.

"But seriously, Sterling," she continued, "I don't intend to lose this chance. You know all those places—you must!—and you simply must take me where I can see real desperadoes—"

"Armed, I suppose, even to cutlasses between their teeth!"

"You needn't make fun of me. Real desperadoes, sitting at tables with their girls. I want—"

"Stella," interrupted the young man,

"if you like, I will be serious. There are gangsters and such fellows in this town, and a few of them I know by sight. They're nothing to look at, for the most part. They don't wear red sashes about their middles, or carry swords. They don't resemble pirates in the least. If you're very, very anxious to know their type, and want to spend a depressing hour or two, I'll arrange to take you through one of our State institutions for the feeble-minded. There you can see any number of the same sort of fellow that's outside, toting a gun, and, when he's coked up, using it. I'll promise to satisfy your curiosity that far; but outside of that I don't intend to take you slumming, dear. It's not pleasant. Furthermore, it's not particularly safe."

"Safe!" exclaimed the girl, her voice tinged with scorn. "I'm tired of being safe! Anyway, I'd be safe with you, Sterling."

Her hand rested in his arm, and now he pressed against it, drawing her a trifle nearer.

"I intend to keep you that way," he said.

They had reached the theater. In the lobby men and women, alone and together, stood talking, laughing, watching. The crowd had a complex movement, a kind of chromatic, kaleidoscopic design not easily fathomable. Stella's eyes swept the colored pattern of shifting figures, and her pupils dilated with pleasure. She said to herself that she loved crowds. It was somehow an adventure to thread one's way through this one, to become a part of its shifting pattern.

They entered an auditorium that was already darkened, and just as they were shown to their seats the curtain went up.

II

THE next morning Stella slept late. She lunched with her father, and learned that he was going out to spend the afternoon with some old friends whom he had discovered in town.

Elliot was busy with a court case that he was prosecuting. He had told Stella this on the evening before, and there was no likelihood of his appearing to take her for a drive and tea. The afternoon was before her, and she was left to the promptings of her own whims.

For a while no whim, of a number that flitted through her mind, appeared particu-

larly potent. Two or three times she dismissed the notion of visiting some of the shops, only to entertain it again. After all, she was in need of a few trifles; and it would be more amusing out of doors than in.

The day was not very cold, a hearty sun was shining, and, since it had not snowed for several weeks, the streets were clear. As Stella stepped out, the flush of a never failing romantic expectancy in her cheeks and the quickness of her stride gave her a sort of springtime grace. To the imaginative eye she might have seemed a premonitory symbol—the first promise of a gentler season that was still, by the calendar, many weeks distant.

She turned into Fifth Avenue, and her pace slackened. It had become leisurely, but there was no lassitude in it. Her abounding vitality remained with her, and was suggested by her person, even when her body was at rest. It had more than a physical expression—it was an emanation, an aura that surrounded her continually.

Again she was in a crowd, and once more she was feeling that peculiar urge of curiosity and pleasure. Momentarily a little frown cut across her forehead. She was thinking of her *fiancé*, and of his refusal to gratify her wish to witness some of the romantically sinister spectacles of the city. What an old-fashioned boy he was! Her frown vanished, and she smiled with mingled pity and tenderness.

Then, turning her face, Stella's eye was attracted by the window of a hat shop. She walked toward the glass, looking meanwhile at a little fur-trimmed turban that was set out, like a jewel, on a small velvet-covered dais. For several seconds she critically examined this confection of an adroit milliner. More and more it seduced her.

In the end she turned toward the revolving door and pushed her way into the shop; but the hat she had admired was not for sale, and others of a similar order lacked the same subtle appeal. Within ten minutes she was leaving the shop.

She reached the revolving door just as another customer was about to go out. Stella examined the other woman with swift, appraising glances. There was something flamboyant in the luxury of her fur wrap. Her short-vamped slippers and clocked stockings were likewise arresting, as was the thick band of seed pearls about her throat—scarcely an ornament for after-

noon wear. Flamboyance—that was the note she struck; a kind of flaunting, not wholly proper elegance.

Her figure, Stella perceived, was slender, in spite of the thick fur that wrapped it about; and with one quick glance Stella also saw that the face was young. How young? This first instant of scrutiny was too brief for a just appraisal. She might be no older than Stella herself; and yet, in spite of an almost doll-like face, with lips tinted to a pout, the girl felt herself in the presence of one vastly more knowing than herself, immeasurably older in experience.

There at the door the two young women stood smiling at each other, each politely offering to the other the right to go out first. After an awkward instant the stranger entered one of the compartments and swung the door toward the street. Stella followed. As she was about to turn, continuing her stroll, she saw the other woman stagger back a step and then sway, as if she were about to fall to the pavement.

Instinctively Stella caught her arm. The young woman's face, a moment ago almost the mask of an emotionless doll, now revealed a surprising contortion of pain. Evidently she had grown suddenly weak, and Stella's strength was scarcely sufficient to keep her on her feet.

In a moment or two, however, the attack—the sudden vertigo or whatever it was that had seized her—was passing. She was no longer a dead weight on Stella's sustaining arm, and the taut lines of pain in her face relaxed.

"Thank you!" she whispered, her voice barely audible.

"You feel better now?"

"Yes, much better. It goes away—quick enough. Can we get a taxi?"

The sudden assumption of their companionship did not, at such a moment, appear unnatural.

"You'd like me to see you home?"

"Please—that would be good of you."

Passers-by, touched to curiosity, were looking at them, pausing to stare. Still giving the strange young woman a partial support, Stella pushed through the little throng to the curb. At her summons a passing taxi drew up. They got in, and the stranger gave an address near Madison Avenue. Then, leaning back against the cushions, she rested a hand on her companion's arm.

Her voice was low, a half whisper.

"You can't imagine the pain—just for a second or two. No one could stand it longer than that!"

"What is it?" asked Stella.

"My heart, deary."

There was something congruous in her abrupt assumption of this caressing word—something that fitted, that was in keeping with her whole overornate exterior.

"How dreadful! You've had—attacks before?"

"Oh, yes—I don't know how many times—for the last three or four years. I guess the thing was coming on a long time before I knew anything about it. Anyhow, that's what the doctors tell me. Of course they make me laugh! What good are they?"

"Certainly you ought to be very careful," Stella counseled gravely.

Her companion surprised Stella by laughing—an uncalled for laugh that was both harsh and obscurely ironical.

"Careful?"

Further words seemed to hand, unspoken, upon her lips. Sharply she turned, and for the first time she examined Stella's face with an embarrassing frankness.

"I'd hardly had a chance to see you before," she explained. "How young you are, child!"

Stella laughed.

"Much younger than you?"

"I should say so!" exclaimed the other, with an almost brutal directness. "Of course—years!"

What was the reason for this curious admission? Why, Stella wondered, did she appear particularly childlike in this other woman's eyes—so childlike that her companion seemed scarcely to think of her as another woman, feeling no necessity to pretend to an equality of age? Was it less a difference of years than of experience, which measures age far more justly than months and days? Again, obscurely, Stella was conscious of her companion's vastly superior sophistication.

But the other was speaking.

"We don't even know each other's name," she said. "My name is Dulcie Armstrong." She hesitated for a second. "Maybe—you've heard of me?" she added questioningly.

Dulcie Armstrong—was it the name of some celebrity? Yet it fell meaninglessly on Stella's ears. Slowly she shook her head.

"No—I don't believe I have. My name is Stella Beresford."

Dulcie was nodding. Her elaborately pouted lips had a half sarcastic curve.

"No! That's right, deary—you wouldn't. It wouldn't be likely *you'd* have heard of me."

"I don't understand!"

"Never mind! Listen, Stella—we're almost at my home. Come in with me, will you?"

"I—I can—yes. Yes—I'd be glad to."

By the barely discernible hesitation in her voice Stella betrayed that she understood at least something concerning Dulcie Armstrong. She could not clearly place this young woman, could not with any assurance put her into her precise stratum of society; but that stratum, Stella was now assured, differed from her own.

Nevertheless, she did not dislike Dulcie. With a rising sense of adventure, very delicious to her romantic spirit, she accompanied her into the lobby of a strange apartment house.

A pleasantly grinning negro boy was standing near the elevator. He stepped aside as they entered the cage, and then took them up to the third floor.

"It's only a step down the hall," said Dulcie.

Her tone had now the easy familiarity of a prolonged acquaintanceship.

"We might have known each other," thought Stella, smiling within herself, "for at least ten years!"

They paused at a door. Dulcie opened it, and then stooped quickly to pick up a card that had been pushed underneath. Something was scrawled on the back of the card.

"Damn his nerve!" she exclaimed, with frankly vulgar impatience; and then, smiling again, she explained briefly. "It's a note from a poor fool I know named Bradon. Absolutely no good! Been here and leaves this to say he'll be back again. He needn't think that I'd care if he never came back!"

They had turned sharply from a very narrow inner hall into a living room luxuriously crowded. Stella's eye was caught, at the first glance, by a tall screen near the windows, very heavy, with flowered carvings at the top and lacquered figures of Japanese maidens on the glittering panels. At the moment she had no opportunity for a farther scrutiny.

"Well, here we are at home, Stella!" her new friend was exclaiming. "Shall we mix some cocktails?"

III

Now Stella was seated in this room crowded with expensive furnishings that somehow suited Dulcie Armstrong, made a proper setting for her, and vaguely helped to explain her.

Dulcie sat with crossed legs, looking at Stella and smiling. She had smiled, too, when Stella refused the refreshment she offered. It was the indulgent smile one gives to a child.

"Funny the way we met!" chattered Dulcie.

"Yes, but I'm awfully glad I was able to help you."

The older woman nodded sagely.

"Things come about that way—things you'd never expect. Ordinarily, you'd never have met me in the world—never in the world!"

It was on Stella's lips to ask why, but she remained silent. To put that question seemed like asking for a confidence which she couldn't properly demand; and in a measure, bit by bit, she was beginning to answer the question herself. As understanding came to her, a very charming excitement quickened her pulses. Hadn't she been dreaming of a peep at just this sort of life? At present she had no positive knowledge of Dulcie Armstrong's activities; but assuredly her new acquaintance's way of life was not the way that Stella had always known.

In the interval of silence the two young women sat looking at each other, measuring each other with curious eyes, yet with friendly smiles on their lips. Each appeared fully aware of the other's difference. In Dulcie's attitude there was something of a swagger, while Stella seemed somewhat like a disobedient boy who has gone away in secret with a forbidden playmate.

This brief session of friendly scrutiny was interrupted by a tap on the door.

"Excuse me, deary," said Dulcie.

She disappeared into the hall, and Stella heard her say, in a voice none too friendly:

"Well! So you came back again!"

The response was in masculine tones, a trifle high-pitched, with just the suggestion of a whine.

"That's what I said. You got the note I stuck under the door, didn't you?"

"Yes, I got it. Now that you've come, what do you want?"

Before the man could answer, Dulcie reappeared, her back to the visitor, her pouted lips compressed. The man followed her, stopped an instant as he caught sight of Stella, and then very faintly shrugged his shoulders, as if to him the presence of a stranger didn't matter, after all. Nevertheless, he did not advance beyond the door; and when he spoke to Dulcie, who remained with her back to him, his voice was audible only in fragments to Stella.

Abruptly Dulcie wheeled, facing him with an angry gesture.

"You'll never get together!" she exclaimed shrilly. "You're through, Braddon. You don't belong any more!"

He was whispering urgently. Even in the fragments that came to Stella's ears there was still the suggestion of a whine.

Stella examined the man. His felt hat was old, the ribbon stained. His coat was unpressed, as well as his trousers. He was a seedy fellow—contrasting strangely with Dulcie's flamboyant elegance; yet between these two there was an obvious intimacy that was betrayed by Dulcie's derisive comments, which she took no care to hide by lowering her voice.

"Look here, Braddon!" she exclaimed finally. "I don't care how well you put over that job. That's ancient history. You hadn't hit the chutes then. We're through—I told you that before. This is the last time—do you get that? If you come here again, I'll—"

Her voice was lost in the hall, whither Braddon followed her, with a hangdog grin of satisfaction on his face. Evidently his petition had been granted, whatever it was. Was he asking for money, Stella wondered? Certainly he looked in need of it.

Stella smiled with secret delight. Really, this was an adventure! Poor old Sterling had refused to show her any of the city's hidden life—its sinister figures, its dubious women—and of the last she had miraculously discovered one for herself! Already her romantic imagination had made of Dulcie Armstrong a fascinating adventuress. She wanted to know more! She wanted to understand!

In spite of the barriers between them, there was a human appeal in Dulcie, a sort of careless kindness. Stella told herself firmly that she liked Dulcie, however that young woman might live.

The outer door closed, Braddon was gone, and Dulcie came back into the room.

"What a poor fool!" she exclaimed. "You got a look at him, Stella? A couple of years ago he was a sheik—think of that! But it got him—the white stuff—snow. He's through. I'm too good-natured. I oughtn't to give him anything. Why should I? Well, I told him this was the finish!"

She sat down, shrugged away the memory of her visitor, and once more smiled at Stella.

"Tell me something about yourself, little girl. You come from the South, don't you? I thought so from the way you talk. Listen, Stella—I think we're going to be friends. I like you, deary. It's been a long time since I've known a little girl like you."

There was just the suggestion, momentary and swiftly gone, of a vague regret in her voice.

"I hope you like me, and I wish you'd drop in here to see me whenever you can. Let's understand right now that you needn't worry about inviting me to your place. Maybe I wouldn't fit!"

She laughed with a boisterous bravado. To Stella her honesty was appealing. Certainly Dulcie Armstrong made no pretense to any status in the more conventional world. Under other circumstances she might be much less frank, but now she appeared to seek Stella's good will out of an impulsive liking for the younger girl—and to seek it by frankness.

Stella was saying that this was her first experience in New York. She prated pleasantly, like a child, while Dulcie wore an indulgent smile.

"And so I simply made papa bring me!" Stella concluded.

"And wasn't there something more than just the attraction of the big town?" asked Dulcie.

Stella's cheeks, already brightly colored, flamed a little more intensely.

"I thought so, little girl! You had a sweetheart here, too, didn't you? Tell me about him!"

But before she could exchange this further confidence, the conversation was stopped by the opening of the hall door. Unceremoniously some one had come in. A quick step advanced along the inner hall, and a man appeared.

"Hello, Jack!" cried Dulcie.

"I didn't knock. I thought you were alone."

"Come in, Jack. I want you to meet a little friend of mine—Miss Beresford. Stella, this is Jack Vegtel."

Vegtel advanced and took Stella's hand. Their eyes met. Vegtel's eyes were a very pallid blue—cold and curiously unpleasant. His hair, gleaming and closely plastered to his head, was contrastingly black. His small mustache was waxed at the tips, and sprang out from his face in two stiletto-like points. He was perhaps too nicely groomed. There was a foppish touch to the close fit of his coat and the knife edge of his trousers.

After the first glance and the first conventional smile of greeting, Stella's eyes fell, but she knew that Vegtel was still examining and appraising her. He held her hand until, embarrassed, she withdrew it.

To Stella the atmosphere of the room had changed. A few minutes earlier Bradon's interruption had in no way disturbed her. That had been a welcome detail in a mysterious sequence of events. It had served, in a measure, to explain Dulcie Armstrong, and it had seemed wholly natural that she should receive some obscure hanger-on coming with a demand for money. No doubt the suave presence of Jack Vegtel, who had something of the air of a polite villain in a melodrama, was equally natural; yet it was disquieting.

Stella was conscious of an unaccountable uneasiness, an apprehension. She glanced at the little watch inaudibly ticking on her wrist, and stood up.

"I hadn't an idea it was so late!" she cried. "Really, I must go!"

"Are you sure, little girl? You'll come and see me soon again, Stella?"

"Of course I will!"

"I'll be expecting you. Just give me a call, dear."

The women embraced, and Dulcie, with her arm passed around Stella's waist, moved with her to the door.

"You were awfully good to me this afternoon," Dulcie was saying. "I don't want you to forget me now. You will come again, won't you? I like you, Stella!"

Stella was touched by the impulsive friendliness of the other woman.

"I like you too, Dulcie. I'll come soon."

The door closed, and she moved down

the corridor. Dulcie Armstrong returned to her other guest.

"Well!" remarked Vegtel. "Where did you meet that little girl? Looks like a nice kid."

"She is a nice kid, too!" exclaimed the woman, her voice colored with a sudden belligerency.

The tone was caught by Vegtel. He shrugged his shoulders.

"All right! Entertain yourself, if you like, Dulcie. When does the old boy come again?"

"He'll be on hand this evening."

"Good enough! You've played him along nicely, Dulcie. It'll be about time to touch him up."

"You *are* a low dog, aren't you, Jack?" exclaimed the woman, half playfully, yet half in scorn.

This Vegtel ignored.

"I've looked him up a plenty. He's married, all right, just as you thought. Has two daughters, too. One of them goes to one of those flossy girls' schools. When the time comes, he ought to be easy to scare—he'll come across. If you could get him to write you a couple of letters—"

"He'll do that—give him time. I suppose you're right, Jack. If these old birds with plenty of jack want to play around, I guess they ought to be willing to pay well for it!"

IV

By the time she had reached the street Stella was rid of her oppressive sense of apprehension. Indeed, the thought of it made her smile a little.

"You are a goose, Stella Beresford," she whispered to herself. "You wanted an adventure, and as soon as one comes you want to run away!"

The eager color returned to tint her cheeks.

"This morning," she whispered, communing with herself once more, "you were bored, and this afternoon you spent a couple of hours with a real adventure. I know she must be that; but there's something sweet about her, too. That fellow Vegtel—I wonder what he is?"

"Well! You don't even know me any more, do you?"

Starting, the girl lifted her eyes in surprise. Then she gave a little gasp of happy astonishment. Sterling Elliot was standing in front of her.

"Why, Sterling! I didn't see you at all!"

"I know you didn't. I could have taken your arm and walked off with you without you knowing anything about it. You're dreadfully careless for a little girl all alone in a big city!"

They laughed, and then Elliot asked:

"What are you doing so far uptown?"

"Just adventuring, dear! And what are you doing? I thought you were to be in court?"

"Yes, I expected to be. The case was continued until the next session. I called up your apartment, but you had gone out."

"Well, we'll have a little stroll, and then you can take me home. Papa's spending the afternoon with some of his cronies."

She passed her hand through Elliot's arm, glancing up into his face with a swift mischief in her eyes that he perceived but could not fathom. He was unaware, of course, that she had just met Dulcie Armstrong, and Stella felt a mischievous thrill in the knowledge that this was a secret which she fully intended to keep. Sterling would hear nothing about the adventure of this afternoon, or of the future visits Stella proposed to make to her new acquaintance.

They walked slowly, mingling with the crowds. After a few moments Stella's attention was attracted by the approach of a tall girl whose flaunting air reminded her suddenly of Dulcie. There was no closer resemblance, no similarity of face; yet this girl's manner was, in a way hardly definable, Dulcie's manner.

The girl was about to pass when Stella, who had been watching her closely, was astonished to see her lips curve to a momentary smile and her head move with a barely perceptible nod. The nod and the smile—they seemed directed at Sterling!

"Who was that, Sterling?"

"You noticed how shyly she greeted me," said Elliot, with a brief chuckle. "Friendly—and yet not exactly so. No, we're not precisely friends. That, Stella, was Miss Joan Wolff. The name doesn't mean anything to you, but it's pretty well known along Broadway. At my—request—she paid a little visit to the district attorney's office last week. There were a few questions we wanted to ask her in connection with a pleasant little piece of blackmailing that has been going on recently. The victim was a man pretty well known socially."

"I don't quite understand, Sterling."

"Naturally you wouldn't; but Miss Wolff isn't an uncommon type. The successful women of her sort sometimes accumulate large sums of money. They play a very agreeable little game, Stella. A good many of them are recruited from the revues and so forth, where they get into the public eye and gain a little notoriety. They make the acquaintance of some respectable millionaire out for a little fling. After they've got all they can out of him in the way of jewels and expensive gifts, they turn him over to their gentlemen hangers-on, who make a living by blackmail. All that is needed for that is a few letters, a photograph or two, or something of the sort. It's very hard for our office to fix anything illegal upon most of those girls. They work very shrewdly. We know about them, but the clever ones—young women like this Wolff girl, for instance, or a former cabaret dancer named Dulcie Armstrong—"

The name fell so startlingly from his lips that Stella could not restrain the quick closure of her hand upon his arm. Anxiously he turned his face to her.

"What's the matter, Stella?"

She had regained her aplomb, and was able to feign surprise.

"Nothing! What do you mean? Please go on with what you were saying, Sterling."

He began to talk again, but, although her head was inclined attentively, Stella scarcely listened. Elliot did not notice the mischievous flush in her cheeks. Now, certainly, she would not tell him! And what an exciting adventure it had been, after all, to meet Dulcie Armstrong! Sterling would never know a whisper of their friendship. That, Stella thought, was a delightful secret. How angry poor old Sterling would be if he found out!

Again Stella's hand closed over his arm—now affectionately.

V

For Stella there hung about Dulcie Armstrong the glamour of the half-world. That glamorous mystery, so appealing to Stella's high-spirited innocence, converted their subsequent encounters—a tea or two together, and a few chats at Dulcie's apartment—into conspiratorial meetings. These meetings were essentially uneventful, but through Stella's imagination they took on an aspect of derring do.

Between the two young women, in spite

of the wide divergence of their characters, a measure of genuine affection developed. To Dulcie Armstrong, in particular, more than a little tired of life, more than a little wearied by the harsh race she had run, there was a strange, seducing charm in the younger girl's innocence.

Sometimes, when Stella was calling, there were visitors at Dulcie's apartment. Never other women—always men. They, too, had a certain sinister glamour, but Stella held most of them in contempt. Jack Vegtel, who was more frequently on hand, was the object of her especial dislike. She had never overcome her initial sense of apprehension in his presence. In all his suave gestures she read a subtle, incomprehensible danger.

It was easier, of course, to understand the danger that lurked in his approaches toward her.

On the day of their first meeting he had held her hand a second too long, meanwhile looking into her face with a bold earnestness. This was the beginning of Vegtel's effort to ingratiate himself. He seemed unconcerned by Stella's open gestures of dislike. They did not chill him. When she frowned, he smiled. When she failed to smile at him, he laughed. He was as impervious to Stella's rebuffs as he was to the angry glances of Dulcie Armstrong herself.

Toward Stella, Dulcie had developed emotions of an almost maternal tenderness. With this protective sense she resented Vegtel's debonair advances; and it came to her finally that it would be far better if she refused to see Stella any more, if she told Stella that their friendship must come to an end.

What right, Dulcie asked herself bitterly, had she to such a friendship? Yet she felt lacking in the strength to give it up. Stella had returned to her life some measure of a lost sweetness, the memory of a wistful innocence whose very existence she had forgotten.

One afternoon Stella had gone with her father to visit one of his friends—a man named Whibly, who, when he was not living in his country house a few hours' drive out of town, occupied an uptown apartment. Stella rather enjoyed the company of Whibly's daughter, Julia. Indeed, this was a friendship that would undoubtedly have developed more rapidly had it not been for Stella's adventurous absorption with Dulcie Armstrong.

The afternoon passed agreeably. Finally, when old Beresford and his daughter emerged to the street, it suddenly came to Stella that she was not very far from Dulcie's apartment. Dulcie was not expecting her that afternoon, and there was no chance at the moment to telephone, but why not run in for a few minutes' chat?

Stella turned to her father.

"Do you mind going on alone, dad?"

"Why, no, child—not if you've something to do."

"Just a little shopping—but it would probably bore you."

Beresford smiled his agreement. They separated. Standing on the corner, Stella watched him as he departed. Her spirits were almost gleeful. She entertained the emotions of a child who has just outwitted an unsuspecting parent. The fib she had told her father seemed a charming part of the adventure.

Then, turning, she hurried forward. With quick steps she approached Dulcie's apartment. When she entered the lobby, the elevator boy recognized her and grinned pleasantly. He took her to the third floor.

Stella came to the familiar door and knocked. Her hand had closed over the knob, and, as she turned it, the door yielded. Without waiting for Dulcie's appearance, Stella went in.

As she entered the living room, she found Jack Vegtel advancing toward the door.

"Well!" he exclaimed. "This is the best surprise in the world! How are you to-day, Miss Beresford?"

Stella nodded coldly.

"Dulcie is in?" she asked.

For the fraction of an instant Vegtel seemed to hesitate. Then he spoke.

"Certainly—making a change, I believe." A nod of his head indicated the closed door of the bedroom. "She'll be out in a minute or two."

With a certain hesitation, which she could not quite explain, Stella found a seat.

Vegtel took the nearest chair.

"It's awfully pleasant to have this chance of a little chat alone with you," he began.

"I really didn't come here for that pleasure, Mr. Vegtel."

"Now, Stella!" cried Vegtel, assuming an abrupt familiarity. "Why do you say that to me?"

She made no reply. Vegtel rose from his chair and came nearer. Raising her eyes

in swift apprehension, Stella looked at the man. There was something almost taunting in his face—an expression, it came to her suddenly, of feline cruelty—the suave, savage pleasure of a cat toying with its victim. Instinctively Stella glanced toward the closed door. Strange that Dulcie hadn't put out her head and greeted her! Stella thought of calling.

"Can you forgive me?" asked Vegtel in a murmuring voice.

"I don't understand you, Mr. Vegtel."

"I mean that I told you just a little bit of a lie a few seconds ago. The fact is, Dulcie isn't at home just now. She telephoned and asked me to wait for her. She'll be here in a few minutes."

"What right had you—" began Stella angrily.

He came still nearer.

"Because, little girl, I didn't want you to be impulsive and hurry away. I wanted to talk to you."

Stella sprang up from her chair. Instantly Vegtel was at her side. His fingers closed over her arm.

"Please don't touch me!" she cried. "I'm going at once!"

"No, you mustn't! I want—"

She jerked back her arm, to free herself from the unwelcome contact of his fingers, but the gesture was ineffectual. Vegtel's clasp tightened. The eyes of the girl, whose cheeks were flaming crimson, met those of the man. She saw again in his eyes a feline expression of cruel playfulness. Her own pupils dilated with instinctive alarm; yet her response was more of indignation than fear.

Both were silent. It was a tableau that was maintained, perhaps, for a second. Then, quickly, with a show of unsuspected strength, Vegtel drew Stella toward him. It was a swift motion that unbalanced her. She could not shrink back from his infolding arm. It was about her shoulder, tightly.

All the muscles of her slender body tensed themselves. Her lips tightened. She did not speak, reserving every energy for an urgent straining against Vegtel's imprisoning embrace; but so rigidly did he hold her that an observer would scarcely have suspected the taut opposition of strength against strength. That was, however, revealed in one obvious particular. It was revealed by the girl's backward flung head, exposing a white, tendon-strained throat.

Over this came Vegtel's lips, missing her own lips and chin. Stella struggled helplessly against a contact that thrilled her with repulsion. Even now, unable at the moment to escape from his arms, she was less fearful than intolerably angry. For the first time in her life she was conscious of a savage hate. She was almost blindly enraged. She struck at Vegtel with her hands, clenched into small, ineffectual fists.

The hall door opened, there was a quick step, and the two mutely struggling figures were conscious of a gasp drawn quickly in amazement. Stella found herself released. This abrupt freedom left her still straining backward, and she stumbled into the chair behind her. Her eyes, incapable at the instant of clear focusing, were aware in distorted outlines of Dulcie's figure crossing the room.

"Jack Vegtel!" cried Dulcie. "You impudent dog! Get out of here! Get out of here, I say!"

Vegtel was adjusting his necktie and shrugging his coat into its wonted perfect fall over his shoulders.

"Hello, Dulcie!" he replied. "What a pretty tongue you have!"

"Get out!" replied Dulcie, her voice rising in pitch. "What a low dog you are!"

Impetuously she seized Vegtel by the coat sleeve, pulling him with angry jerks toward the door. Awkwardly stumbling, he was forced to follow. In the vestibule Dulcie thrust his hat and coat into his hands. She flung open the door.

"Furthermore," she added in a harsh whisper, "you're a poor fool, Vegtel! What kind of a mess do you want to get yourself in by trying to play around with that little girl? Do you know who she's going to marry? Well, I'll tell you, and if you can't be decent you can at least show sense. Elliot—the assistant district attorney! Now, get out of here and think that over!"

Vegtel found himself in the corridor, and the door slammed shut on his back.

Turning swiftly, Dulcie hurried back to the living room. At once she was at Stella's side, a caressing hand running over the younger girl's head.

"You poor kid!" she cried. "He gave you a scare, did he? Well, I won't let that swine bother you again!"

Stella lifted her head, and her lips trembled to a smile.

"I wasn't so much afraid," she mur-

murea. He—he took me by surprise. Oh, Dulcie, how hateful! How can you have such a creature for a friend? No, I wasn't afraid. I was—enraged!"

"Friend!" responded Dulcie scornfully. "I've forgotten what it is to have friends. Dear, you're the only friend I've found in years!" Her voice grew lower. "And—and I'm afraid I'll have to give you up," she added slowly.

"What do you mean, Dulcie?"

The older girl seemed about to reply when, without any premonitory sign, her doll-like face was tortured by acute, sudden pain. Her lips drew back in an agonized grimace, and her hands, with fingers stiffly spread, pressed themselves urgently over her heart.

Suddenly projected upon Stella's memory was the picture of their first meeting outside the hat shop. Again, in another environment, poor Dulcie was reenacting the details of that scene. At once Stella was on her feet, supporting Dulcie in her arms.

As before, the attack rapidly subsided. Dulcie sank into a chair. The tenseness of her face relaxed, but it remained white and frightened.

"It's all right now," she whispered.

"It's over now."

"Do you want anything? What can I do for you?"

"Nothing, child."

"But, poor Dulcie! This is terrible! Do you go to the doctor? What does he tell you to do? Surely he advises something!"

Faintly the older girl laughed. She leaned her head against the chair back, and with a touch of familiar bravado she crossed her legs.

"Yes, Stella dear, the medicos are full of advice—very strong on that! They tell me that I must avoid all strain, and all excitement, and lead a very regular life, and be a very good, quiet girl!"

Again she laughed, now harshly.

"Too late for that!" she added, almost as if talking to herself. "I'm in this game now, and I have to play it out. I can't quit. I—I don't know that I want to, if I could. Still, often, when I look at you, Stella, you make me think of myself when—"

Her voice trailed off into silence, and again, with a characteristic gesture of bravado, of careless defiance, she shrugged her shoulders.

"Listen, Stella! I had decided to tell you something very important the next time we met, but I don't feel quite up to it this afternoon. It's getting late, too. You'd better run along now. I'm all right. Don't be afraid to leave me. I want to be alone for an hour or so and work off some bad spirits. To-day it's been one thing after another with me. Just as I was coming in, I found that fellow Braddon—you remember him?—hanging out on the corner waiting for me. I told him where to get off. He looks like an absolute bum—gone all the way down the chutes. Then, when I opened the door, I found that dog Vegtel—well, we'll have our talk some other time."

Stella hesitated.

"You're sure you're all right to be left alone, Dulcie?"

"Oh, yes, absolutely, little girl! Tell me, can you manage to run away from your sweetheart for an hour or two to-morrow evening?"

"I really wasn't expecting to see him to-morrow."

"Then come about nine o'clock, if you can."

"But what is it you want to tell me, Dulcie?"

"I can't tell you now. Come to-morrow, dear!"

As Stella moved toward the door, Dulcie came with her. As the younger girl stepped into the little vestibule, Dulcie put her arms about her, kissing Stella with a tenderness that seemed mingled with a profound yet obscure melancholy.

VI

EARLY the next evening, shortly before leaving her home to keep the appointment with Dulcie, Stella sat before the glass of her dressing table, apparently looking at the reflection of her own face. Her eyes, however, saw beyond the mirror, and were almost unconscious of the image that it reflected. She was thinking of Dulcie Armstrong.

Lately a change had come in her emotions—a change that had been hastened and crystallized by her unpleasant adventure with Vegtel the day before. Much of the romantic glamour had departed from her relations with Dulcie. Stella no longer thrilled to the consciousness that she was having a peep at a hidden world that is half sinister and half intriguing. The de-

sire to know more about that phase of life, to penetrate into the details of its mystery, had vanished. In place of these aspects of Dulcie's existence Stella was now aware of its sordid flavor.

Moreover, the fact that she had concealed her intimacy with Dulcie from Sterling Elliot vaguely pricked her conscience. After all, she had wanted always to be frank with Sterling.

However, how could she have told him? He would have been worried and angry. Even now she must keep the secret.

Yes, she felt less of the glamour and more of the sordidness of Dulcie's way of life; and yet, somehow, she could not bring herself to judge the older girl harshly. Obscurely she felt that Dulcie was in large measure helpless—a victim of her human weaknesses, and, more than that, of chance and environment. These half philosophic reflections moved vaguely through her mind as she strove to find excuses for the other woman.

Stella's eyes fell, and chanced to rest for a moment on the dial of her wrist watch. It surprised her to discover that it was already nearly nine o'clock. Slipping into her wrap, she walked quickly from her bedroom into the living room, purposing to tell her father that she was going out; but old Beresford was dozing in his chair, with a book lying open on his lap. Stella tiptoed to his side and kissed him on the forehead. He did not awaken.

Outdoors she beckoned a taxi at the corner, and gave the address of Dulcie's apartment. When she knocked at the door it was opened for her at once. The two girls embraced.

"Come in, dear! I was waiting for you."

They sat down together on a sofa that was heaped up with cushions in silk-embroidered slips.

"You were well to-day, Dulcie?" asked Stella. "I've been so worried about you! I blamed myself yesterday for leaving you so soon."

"No, you shouldn't have worried, Stella dear. The attack was all over when you left; but it was very sweet of you to think of me!"

She took Stella's hand, and fondled it. The younger girl looked up, and was astonished at the humid brilliance of her friend's eyes. Dulcie's eyes were brimming with tears!

"What is it, Dulcie? Tell me, what is the matter?"

Dulcie shook her head with an angry gesture. Her thick hair tossed against her face.

"I'm still a good bit of a fool, I suppose," she murmured. Then, still clasping Stella's hand in her own, she went on haltingly: "You remember, deary, yesterday I said there was something I wanted to tell you? Yesterday wasn't the first time I had thought of it. The notion has been in my head for a couple of weeks." She hesitated. "I guess you'd say that's a sign I still have some conscience left!"

Dulcie laughed, a touch of self-scorn in her voice.

"Tell, me, Dulcie," put in Stella, "what is it you mean? I don't understand."

"Wait, dear. It isn't easy for me to tell you. At the same time, it has been on my mind constantly. It was on my mind while I was out at dinner this evening, and all the time I was hurrying back to meet you."

She paused.

In the adjoining room—Dulcie's bedroom—there was a faint rustling, as if the wind had stirred a sheaf of papers. Intent with each other, neither of the young women noticed the sound. Nevertheless, it was significant. Nor was it, as it might have seemed, a wind stirring among loose papers. Instead, it was the gliding footsteps of a man, moving from his place of concealment in Dulcie's closet to a position behind the bedroom door, whence he could watch the occupants of the living room and remain hidden himself.

The eyes that looked unseen from the crack in the door were the eyes of Braddon, Dulcie Armstrong's former accomplice. A snuffed portion of the snowy drug that had become so necessary to him had charged him with the courage for this desperate adventure—that, and the knowledge that he could extract nothing further from Dulcie without using force.

For weeks he had been considering the chances of this step—covetously, and yet all the while afraid to take it. Meanwhile, his need had grown acute. Even money for the drug that enslaved him was now lacking.

On the previous day, meeting Dulcie on the street, he had tried to borrow from her once more. His appeal met a scornful refusal. Then, as he turned to shuffle away, the sight of a lavallière set with diamonds

that glittered on the girl's throat decided him. He would take the chance.

It ought not, he persuaded himself, to be so great a chance, after all. He was familiar with the apartment. He knew of the fire escape that opened out from Dulcie's window—the window of her bedroom. He could watch until he was certain of her absence, slip in by means of the fire escape—and a few minutes would serve to find her jewels and pocket them.

That evening Braddon had waited near the corner until he saw Dulcie leave the apartment house; but it was then too early for his purpose. He was afraid of meeting some one—a child, perhaps—in the alley at the rear. He knew Dulcie's habits, and it was very unlikely that she would return until quite late.

Braddon strolled away. A little more than an hour later he came back. It was still earlier than he liked, but a nervous urge drove him to do the job he had in mind at once, or else abandon it.

A glance down the alley showed him that it was empty. He hurried down it, and stood under the fire escape. The lower section of the metal ladder was swung up—a possibility he had forgotten. Looking about in the dusk, Braddon saw a packing case that had probably been put outdoors by the janitor. Quietly he carried it over to the fire escape, set it in place, and found that by mounting on the case he could reach one of the metal treads.

Braddon grasped this and swung himself up. There was a painful instant before he gained a secure footing. Then, in a few seconds, he was pushing up Dulcie's window, which he found unlocked.

Thinking of her carelessness, he grinned with satisfaction. He stepped into the bedroom. Fumblingly his hand went along the wall until he found the light switch. As he was about to turn it, he heard the clink of a key at the hall door.

That was the instant when he might have made his escape; but the consciousness that some one was coming in overcame him with surprise, and for a few seconds he was incapable of action. He had confidently counted on having ample time to do his work and leave hours before Dulcie's return; but now a light flared in the living room, and he saw that Dulcie had come in. She was dropping her fur wrap over a chair back.

Once again Braddon's mind became ac-

tive. Should he chance an escape now? At once he decided against it. It would be necessary to raise the window again, scramble out, run down the metal ladder, and jump to the ground. The sequence of these acts seemed noisy and dangerous. Dulcie would hear and make an outcry. By the time he reached the bottom of the fire escape he might be just in time to jump into the arms of the janitor.

This swift reasoning persuaded him that the less dangerous course was to remain in the apartment. Moreover, he was urged to this decision by the fictitious courage of the drug. He felt supremely confident that he could brave out the adventure and attain his purpose.

Suppose Dulcie had come back, and suppose she remained—what of that? He could hide in the deep closet near her bed and stay there for hours, if necessary. Sooner or later she would go to sleep. When she was sleeping soundly, he could carry out his operations almost as easily as first planned.

Dulcie came into the bedroom a few minutes later, but when she switched on the light she saw nothing amiss. Braddon had turned to the closet, and was securely hidden. A few seconds afterward she turned off the light and went back to the living room.

The intruder remained in the closet until he heard voices conversing in the other room. He knew then that Dulcie had a guest—a woman. Bit by bit his curiosity, in addition to the realization that Dulcie and her caller would probably remain where they were, overcame a restraining trepidation. He came out of the closet and posted himself behind the door.

VII

HOLDING Stella's hand, Dulcie Armstrong continued:

"It's this, Stella. I may as well blurt it out all at once and get it over with. I don't think we can be friends any longer. I don't think you had better come here any more."

Stella examined Dulcie's face with astonished eyes.

"What do you mean, Dulcie?"

"Deary, I mean this—I have no right to let you know me. From the beginning, when I saw what a dear little girl you are, I shouldn't have let you come back the second time. I—"

"But, Dulcie—"

"Never mind, dear! You needn't tell me that you wanted to come back, and that you were willing to be friends with me. I know that. I don't know why. Our lives are so different that I don't know why you liked me, and I can't explain very well why I liked you. I suppose—I suppose you gave me back some old memories, Stella!"

There was a pause. Stella was searching for something to say, and Dulcie was frowning. Abruptly she stood up, and, facing Stella, shook her head from side to side, as if to express her impatience.

"Oh," she cried, "this is hard stuff to say! But you know the difference between us, deary. You might keep me for a friend a few weeks or a few months longer, but you'd have to let me go some time. Down in your heart you know that. Well, I'm going to let you go first—before something happens. Yes, before something happens—happens to you! Stella, I've never talked much to you about myself, but you can understand, can't you? When you come to see a woman of my sort, you're likely to jump into a mess any time. Don't ask me just what it might be. It might be almost anything. There's Vegtel, for instance. You're not anxious to meet him again, are you? And there's worse than Vegtel!"

Dulcie sat down again. Stella touched her arm.

"I don't know what to say to you, Dulcie. I know you're fond of me, just as I'm fond of you. I—"

For a second Dulcie's eyes were again brilliant. Impulsively she hugged Stella in a warm, quick embrace.

"Yes, I am dear—too fond of you to see you take a chance. We can't be friends. I'm going to say good-by to you now, little girl, and then I want you to go home and forget that you ever knew I was alive. You understand, don't you? You see why, don't you?"

Suddenly it came to Stella that Dulcie was speaking wisely and truly. Their friendship could not continue. Assuredly their ways were separate. Yet, in spite of Dulcie's way of life, this was an admission very difficult for the younger girl to make. In spite of everything, she felt a real fondness for the other woman, and a kind of pitying tenderness.

Silently she looked at Dulcie, who was not speaking now, but sat with lowered

face; and Stella realized, with a shock of surprise, with what different eyes she now perceived her. It seemed a long time since they had first met. Within a few weeks Stella felt herself to have matured, grown older.

She remembered the naïve emotions of her first few visits to this place. Then she had come with a sense of forbidden adventure and a childlike curiosity. She had desired to pry into hidden things. She had experienced a romantic satisfaction in the knowledge that Dulcie Armstrong was of the half-world—one of those women apparently without scruple about whom the old yellow-backed novels were written. She was far more percipient now.

Again, as earlier in the evening, she saw her friend through eyes of understanding and compassion. Also, without the realization abating anything of her tenderness, she saw Dulcie as one whom life had handled harshly, and sullied. She saw, at this moment, not the glittering adventuress of her earlier imagining, but a woman who was tired, embittered, and disillusioned.

Yes, Dulcie was right. Stella would go now, and these two might never meet again.

From his hiding place Braddon saw, with satisfaction, that the visitor was about to leave. He had overheard the conversation, but had not troubled himself with any positive effort to understand it. Once before, if he remembered rightly, he had seen this younger girl. He wondered a little who she might be. Then he shrugged his shoulders. It didn't matter who she was. He wanted her to clear out, and that was what she was doing.

He watched the two women as they crossed the room arm in arm. They disappeared through the door, and a few seconds later Dulcie Armstrong came back alone.

Behind the bedroom door Braddon was grinning. He felt no apprehension now. Indeed, he was full of a fatuous pride in his own apparent courage. Why hadn't he tried this job long ago? It was easy!

He remembered with perverted satisfaction all the scornful words that Dulcie had spoken to him. Well, he told himself, he was about to have his revenge now!

Why wait, he asked, until Dulcie came to bed and was asleep? She might hang around for two or three hours. Why not tie a handkerchief over his face and step out right away, like a genuine stick-up

man? The thought filled him with a sort of bold glee, swelled him with an unwonted self-satisfaction.

However, the courage lent him temporarily by a drug was not quite sufficient for this further stroke of boldness. He was able to conceive the audacious act, but not to execute it. Behind the door, grimacing, he waited.

He saw that Dulcie was sitting down. She sat with an elbow propped against the back of her chair, her head resting against a cupped palm. His eager eyes noticed the glitter of diamonds on her fingers.

For a long time the girl sat motionless. Braddon began to find a new pride in his own patience, for now it seemed a finer thing to be patient than to be bold. He asked himself if any other man could stand in one spot so long and so noiselessly.

At last, with an abrupt movement, Dulcie stood up. Braddon's muscles tensed. Was she going to turn in now? He was prepared to execute a swift retreat to the closet. Before she could reach the bedroom door he would again be hidden there.

But her back was toward the door, and, after a motionless instant, standing stiffly near the chair she had just abandoned, she moved slowly toward the window. There she stood, near the heavy lacquered screen, colorful with its painted oriental maidens, looking down into the street.

Dulcie was enveloped in a terrible sadness that wrapped her about like a dusky cloak. She was pervaded, too, by a scarcely tolerable bitterness. In swift sequential pictures she reviewed her life. She remembered how a daring recklessness and a hunger for luxury had betrayed her into her first escapade. Before that happened she had been not a great deal unlike her little friend Stella—who was gone now. How strange to realize that she had even remotely resembled Stella!

In those days it had seemed to her that money, jewels, fine clothes, admiration, were worth any price. The price—she was careless of that! Well, she had attained her dreams. The fantastic wishes of her younger self had been gratified. A succession of infatuated fools had passed through her hands, each leaving his tribute, sometimes voluntarily, sometimes by the aid of her confederates, under sinister compulsion. She had succeeded; and to-night, thinking of Stella Beresford, the thought

of her success charged her with a heart-clutching bitterness.

She looked down into the street, idly eyeing the beetle-like maneuvers of motor cars below, and the scurrying of pedestrians, who resembled still smaller and less formidable insects. For Dulcie, at that moment, there was no mystery, no enticement, in all the city. She felt herself utterly without a hope or a desire.

She was used to a tension in her life, a taut drawing of the strings of emotion, but the emotional intensity of this day had greatly wearied her. The sense of being measurelessly tired now came to her, and obliterated all other feeling. She was about to turn from the window and find a chair.

She was about to turn from the window—when she was seized by a familiar premonition. She knew what was approaching. Her eyes widened with fright. Instinctively her hands went up protectively across her heart.

Then came the abrupt shock of pain, horribly intense. Dulcie wanted to scream, but she had no power left, even for this. In one appalling instant the thought came to her that never before had an attack seized her so violently. Near the window, clutching at her heart, she swayed.

The glimmer of the street lights vanished from her eyes. The room itself suddenly grew dark. After swaying for a few seconds, she fell sidewise. Her body struck the lacquered screen and then toppled to the floor. Already her heart had given up the struggle, and had stopped beating.

The instant that Dulcie fell there was a louder crash. The heavy screen, unbalanced, trembled unsteadily for a moment, and lurched forward. As it crashed down, the rounded edge, thick as a cudgel, struck across Dulcie's forehead. It was a formidable blow, but it was delivered to a form already lifeless.

From his concealment Braddon observed these events in amazement. He did not at first realize all that had happened. He expected to see Dulcie stagger to her feet; but, as he watched, she lay quite motionless on the floor.

Very cautiously the intruder came out from behind the door. He glided across the floor, half crouching. Over the prostrate figure he bent, staring. Then, involuntarily, a guttural exclamation escaped his lips.

Dulcie Armstrong was dead!

He stood up, looking about him with some uncertainty. The startling swiftness of the tragedy had in a measure bewildered him. He half forgot his purpose.

In this bewildered uncertainty he was standing when his ear was arrested by the opening of the hall door. Some one was entering the apartment! Was the girl who had gone out an hour ago coming back? He retreated quickly to the bedroom and concealed himself again.

There were brisk footsteps—and a man appeared in the room. Braddon recognized him at once. It was Jack Vegtel.

VIII

AN hour earlier Vegtel had just reached the steps of the apartment house when the lobby door opened and Stella Beresford emerged. Simultaneously Vegtel heard the elevator boy call from his cage:

"Good night, miss!"

Stella's face was lowered, and she seemed to be profoundly preoccupied—so much so, indeed, that she passed Vegtel without once glancing at him or being in any way aware of his nearness. She brushed by so quickly that he had no chance for a greeting. In another moment she was hurrying down the street.

With one foot on a marble step, the man stared after her. For a few seconds he was irresolute. By this time Stella had reached the corner. She turned, and, as her slender figure disappeared, Vegtel determined to follow after her.

It was necessary to see Dulcie later in the evening, but that could wait. Dulcie might not even be at home now; and meanwhile, moved by a whim, Vegtel decided that something interesting might come out of a pursuit of Stella. No longer hesitating, he followed rapidly to the corner.

As he reached the corner, and was making the turn, he again caught sight of Stella; but she had beckoned a taxi, which was drawing up to the curb. She stepped in, and the cab jumped forward. Impossible to overtake her now!

Vegtel shrugged his shoulders, and, swinging his stick, stood on the corner, staring at the passers-by. After all, wasn't it a little too early to call on Dulcie? He decided against an immediate return to her apartment.

He strolled off, and, after walking a block or two, met a friend. Together they entered a small clubhouse, where they had

an animated chat over cigars and Scotch and soda. At last Vegtel remembered his desire to consult Dulcie, and he stood up.

"Must run along now," he said.

On the street, he again walked briskly toward the apartment house. Running up the marble steps, he entered the deserted lobby.

Outside the cage, on a stool, rested the drooping figure of the negro elevator boy, who had fallen sound asleep and was snoring audibly.

Vegtel was about to shake the sleeper by the shoulder, when the indulgent thought came to him that he would let the boy have his nap. The stairs were at hand, and it was only two flights up to Dulcie's floor. Leisurely he began the ascent.

He came to the third floor and Dulcie's door. It was quiet inside, but the girl was probably at home, for a ribbon of light was revealed between the door and the sill. Vegtel put his hand on the knob. Yes, Dulcie was in, for the door was unlocked.

"She has a habit of taking the catch off when she comes in," Vegtel thought to himself. "Some one is going to stroll in here some evening and stick her up!"

Passing into the living room, he looked quickly about him—and halted short just beyond the door. At the moment his thought of a few seconds earlier seemed abruptly verified. He saw the lifeless figure lying on the floor, with the heavy screen partly on top of it.

For a few seconds Vegtel was motionless, his every sense acute, intently vigilant. Then, with a quick realization, it came to him that this was not a case of foul play. That was denied by the position of the body, and, save for the fallen screen, by the perfect order of the room. His tense muscles relaxed, and he moved quickly toward the prostrate figure.

Stooping, he stared down into a face utterly blanched except for a deeply discolored welt across the forehead. Vegtel's eyes sought the fallen screen, and discovered the cause of that purple discoloration. Bit by bit his quick mind guessed what had happened.

After all, it was not surprising. Every one who knew Dulcie intimately, every one acquainted with her infirmity, anticipated her swift going out in this fashion. From the position of the body Vegtel visualized her probable end. She had been standing, he surmised, somewhere near the window

and close to the screen. There she had experienced a seizure—her last. In falling she had struck against the screen, unbalanced it, and received a blow from the turned edge.

Thoughtfully Vegtel stood erect. It was plain that no one had been near Dulcie when she died. No one? He thought suddenly of Stella Beresford, of his glimpse of her as she emerged from the apartment house more than an hour ago; but at once he dismissed from his mind any idea that she might have witnessed the other woman's death. She had seemed preoccupied as she came out, but in no way frightened. Moreover, why should she run away from the scene of an accidental death? He sensed accurately enough that had Stella been at hand, she would have summoned instant aid.

Stooping again, Vegtel put out his hand and touched the dead girl's cheek. It was still faintly warm. Then, certainly, Dulcie had been alive an hour ago, when Stella Beresford took her departure.

But Vegtel's mind, apt for sinister intrigue, was already playing vaguely with a curious thought. At first it was no more than the thought that should he go out now, descend the stairs, and find the elevator boy still asleep, no one would know of his visit to the apartment. Then the last person to have been seen with Dulcie would be—the little Beresford girl! At any rate the elevator boy, who had said good night to her, would know that she had come from Dulcie's apartment.

Probably the elevator boy had no knowledge of Stella's name. No, it was improbable that he knew who she was; but if he were brought face to face with her, he could identify her.

Well, what of that? At the moment Vegtel did not see clearly where his thoughts were leading him. Nevertheless, he seemed to have hit upon something significant. A plan, nebulous and shifting, drifted through his mind.

He began to walk up and down the room, his head bent forward a little, a frown cutting across his forehead.

Thoughts seemingly disconnected were looming up in his mind. Suddenly he remembered Dulcie's warning of yesterday—a harshly whispered warning just as he left the apartment. The little Beresford girl was the *fiancée* of Sterling Elliot, assistant district attorney!

Vegtel stopped short in his pacing. An abrupt laugh broke from his lips, a savage succession of staccato sounds. Sterling Elliot! Young Elliot was playing for a higher job—every one knew that. In a few years, if nothing went wrong in his affairs, he would probably get it. What a joke if it could be generally known that Elliot's *fiancée* had been an intimate of the notorious Dulcie Armstrong! That would put a spoke in Elliot's wheel.

Then, by a quick intuition, Vegtel realized that Elliot had certainly known nothing of Stella's friendship with Dulcie.

Thoughtfully his eye wandered to the still figure on the floor. One of Dulcie's hands was flung out, the palm downward. Vegtel's glance was arrested by the glitter of the diamonds on her fingers. His idle glance became a fixed stare. All the apparently aimless thoughts that had lately filled his mind converged to a mental focus and crystallized themselves; and at once he was in possession of a daring plan.

He recognized that it involved a degree of danger to himself; yet that was not serious. In all probability, if he acted quickly, he could go down the stairs again and find the negro boy still dozing on his stool. Off and on through the night the boy napped. If Vegtel, descending cautiously, found him awake, he could go back unseen and wait for another opportunity.

He even thought of the fire escape. That was less desirable, but it was a possible resort.

How much money was the Beresford girl worth? Vegtel cursed himself for not having looked up her father, with his accustomed eye to possible business in the future; but he had never thought of business in that direction. However, he knew where the girl and her father lived, and that their apartment must be a costly one. Certainly they weren't poor. In any case, there was an immediate profit—a fat one, too—even if he gained nothing from the trap he was about to set.

Instantly Vegtel became active. He hurried to Dulcie's side and lifted up the heavy screen. After some tugging, he set it up again in its original position. Then, stooping over the dead girl, he seized the edge of her dress, and, with a brutal jerk, ripped it open across her bosom. Next he picked the body up and carried it to the center of the room. Here he set the burden down, resting it partly against a chair.

Abandoning Dulcie's body, he seized another chair and overturned it, being careful to work noiselessly. He kicked at the rug with his feet until he produced a succession of ridges and furrows, as if struggling figures had surged back and forth over it. On the center table he overturned the lamp, and he placed a book, open, on the floor.

Hurrying to a tall escritoire that stood against the wall, he jerked open the drawers, turned out their contents on the floor, and scattered the drawers near by. Within a few minutes the room had taken on an aspect of complete disorder, and Dulcie's body, with the torn gown, seemed to have been the central object in a desperate struggle.

Then Vegtel approached the figure of the dead girl once more, stooped over her again, and deftly pulled the rings from her fingers. He dropped these into his pocket. Standing up again, he looked toward the bedroom.

The astonished Braddon, all the while an observer, read the other man's intention. He quickly and silently retreated from the bedroom to the bathroom, realizing that his former refuge, the closet, might not be safe. From the bathroom he slipped into the hall, just as Vegtel switched on the bedroom lights. Braddon turned in at a second bedroom, and waited.

He could hear Vegtel moving about and pulling open drawers. After a while the footsteps moved out into the hall. Then Braddon heard the hall door open and close. The other man had gone.

Before leaving the shelter of the door, Vegtel looked cautiously up and down the corridor. It was empty. He hurried past the elevator shaft to the adjacent stairs, which he hurriedly descended. On the final flight his footsteps were catlike and noiseless. Peeping over the banister, he looked down into the lobby.

The negro boy was still dozing on his stool.

With a faint sigh of relief, but with undiminished caution, Vegtel continued his descent. He edged past the sleeping boy, reached the outer doors, and emerged unseen to the street.

There he stood, just for an instant, grinning with satisfaction.

Meanwhile, assured that Vegtel had departed, Braddon came out of his concealment and hurried to Dulcie's bedroom. It was just as he had surmised—Vegtel had

forestalled him. The bureau drawers were rifled, and two embossed silver jewel boxes lay emptied on her dressing table.

Softly Braddon began to curse. Then he was touched by a swift fear. He turned to the window, raised it, scrambled out to the fire escape, and began a quick descent. As he hung by his hands, his feet touched the tall packing box below. He released his hold, and jumped quickly to the ground. A second later he was hurrying down the alley.

IX

ALL day Stella had been thinking of Dulcie Armstrong. More than ever she was convinced of the older girl's wisdom. Their parting had been necessary; yet it troubled Stella. Indeed, it made her sad.

She remained at home all morning, lurching indoors with her father. He invited her for a drive in the afternoon, but she declined.

"By the way," he said, "I forgot to tell you that Whibly and Julia have gone out to their country place. Whibly wants us to come down for the week-end—this week, if we can. The old boy called me yesterday afternoon, just as they were leaving. If you want to go this week—"

"Yes, I'll go with you, papa," replied the girl listlessly.

After lunch, left alone, she sat down with a book and attempted to read; but for the most part the book remained open in her lap, and Stella sat musing. After all, it was better that she had parted from Dulcie at this time. The hidden sordidness of the other woman's life had begun to oppress her, and she had ceased to find a mischievous pleasure in fibbing to her father and deceiving Sterling as to her whereabouts. Sterling had been right, after all. She recalled his assertion that she would find nothing pleasant in the life of the half-world. His words had proved true.

She stood up. She was restless, and it was useless to try to read. Why hadn't she gone out with her father? The March day was pleasant—almost springlike. Well, at least she could take a stroll.

On the street, she walked slowly, breathing in the air that was premonitory of a gentler season near at hand. Stella began to feel at ease. She smiled when a very small newsboy darted out at her from the corner and pushed an afternoon paper

under her face. Indulgently she took a coin from her hand bag and received the paper. She glanced at the headlines—and then inhaled sharply. Flaring across the top of the outer page she read:

YOUNG WOMAN FOUND MURDERED IN APARTMENT

Dulcie Armstrong, Former Cabaret Dancer, Victim of Thieves

With a blanched face, Stella turned sharply and hurried back home. Inside, she dropped to a chair and examined the paper with startled, scarcely believing eyes. Within a few seconds her amazement and sudden horror at the news of Dulcie's death were mingled with an emotion of consternation. Incredibly, unbelievably, she herself was implicated in this hideous tragedy!

There was a description of the body, found that morning, and of the condition of the apartment. The robbery of Dulcie's jewels was mentioned, and then came the statement that the police were already in possession of important clues. These clues, at the moment, were somewhat conflicting, but one or both might lead, Stella read, to the identification of the murderer or murderers.

First, some one had entered the Armstrong apartment by means of a bedroom window, accessible from the fire escape. The window had been found open, and there were finger-prints on the dusty sill. These were being investigated.

Second, an unknown young woman had been the last to enter the apartment and the last known to leave. This evidence was given by the elevator boy, who declared that he had seen the unknown young woman a number of times during the past few weeks, but did not know her name.

Was there any connection, the reporter suggested, between the unknown man who had gained entrance by means of the fire escape and the young woman who had departed about ten in the evening? A certain connection was indicated by the declaration of the coroner's physician, as well as that of the police surgeon, that death had probably occurred before midnight.

The police were said to hold to the theory that the girl might have acted as a decoy, keeping Miss Armstrong in conversation while a confederate entered the apartment. They did not believe that a blow—the apparent cause of death after an intense struggle—from a rounded wood-

en instrument had been struck by the unknown girl. The blow must have had behind it a man's strength. It might have been delivered as the dead woman and the unknown girl were engaged in a struggle.

With a white face Stella put down the paper. The fact that the surmises of the police concerning herself—whom she at once recognized as the "unknown young woman"—were utterly silly did not lessen their terrifying effect. Poor unlucky Dulcie! Her foresight had been prophetic! She had foreseen a possible danger for Stella in their friendship, and she had insisted upon their separation—too late!

Too late? Stella sought to calm an impulse toward hysteria, to look squarely at the facts. She was impelled to this by one paragraph in which she read:

The entire case is being energetically handled by the district attorney's office, under the direction of Sterling Elliot, assistant district attorney.

That paragraph enabled her to see clearly all that might happen if she were finally identified. Far more than notoriety and a measure of personal disgrace was involved. Probably she would be arrested. It would be disclosed that Stella Beresford, identified as a friend of Dulcie Armstrong, and as the last person seen to leave the dead woman's apartment, was also the *fiancée* of Sterling Elliot!

What a chance, Stella perceived, for scandalous inference! It would at once suggest to the popular mind some insidious connection between women of the Armstrong type and the male blackmailers who were their allies, on the one side, and on the other side the young assistant district attorney. No better political weapon than this could be demanded by Sterling's political opponents. It would mean, Stella saw clearly, the end of his ambition for a public career.

Sterling must not know! More than ever secrecy was necessary. Stella could not possibly come forward, identifying herself, and revealing the simple truth that she had left Dulcie Armstrong alive and well. She must hide the truth—and yet, should discovery occur, her attempt to hide it would all the more suggest her guilt.

But could discovery occur? As Stella's anxious mind went over the possibilities, point by point, she attained to a measure of assurance. Of all poor Dulcie's acquaintances not one knew even Stella's name, save Jack Vegtel. At the thought

of him Stella winced unpleasantly; but, after all, Vegtel had no reason to connect her with the "unknown young woman." Looking at the case with what calm she could muster, she concluded that there was very little chance of discovery.

That evening Stella had promised to go to the theater with Sterling. She told herself that she must find some excuse to break the engagement. She was too much unnerved for an outing, too much unnerved to talk with any one.

Just before dinner time Sterling telephoned and asked to be excused.

"Terribly sorry, dear," he said; "but I've got to work this evening on the Armstrong case. You've read about it?"

"Yes," replied Stella, her voice barely audible.

"You understand, then, Stella?"

"Oh, yes, I understand. Sterling!"

What a relief! At the same time, how terrible to realize that Sterling was bending all his energies to disentangle a mystery that would, if actually solved, ruin him!

Stella ate very little at dinner, telling her father that she felt ill. He was troubled, but she reassured him.

"It's nothing," she declared. "Just a headache. I'll go to bed early. I'll be all right in the morning, papa."

She went to her room, and sat for a long time pondering the dangers and anxieties of her situation. She thought, too, of Dulcie—of the poor girl's terrible and mysterious end. Tears filled her eyes, and, overflowing, seared her cheeks.

Little by little, however, she again grew calm. She thought less of herself and more of the sadness of Dulcie's tragic death. Once again Stella told herself that nothing could happen, that no discovery was possible. At last she undressed, lay down on her bed, and fell asleep.

In the morning, save for an unescapable sense of oppression, she was reasonably calm. Shortly after breakfast her father left the apartment. A little later, as she sat alone in the living room, the telephone rang. The maid appeared, and said that a gentleman wished to speak to her.

"Mr. Elliot?"

"I don't think so, miss."

"He didn't give you his name?"

"No, miss."

Stella rose and went to the little table in the hall where the telephone was placed. She took up the receiver.

"This is Jack Vegtel," came a suave, odiously familiar voice.

Stella felt a swift flush burning in her cheeks. Her first impulse was to thrust the receiver back on its hook, but something—a kind of apprehensive fear—restrained her.

"I have no reason to want to talk to you, Mr. Vegtel."

"Please don't say that, Miss Beresford. I have something very important to tell you."

It seemed to Stella that her fingers had grown icy cold and numb. She could scarcely hold the instrument to her ear; but she controlled her voice.

"There's nothing you could possibly say—" she began.

"Oh, yes, there is!" he interrupted. "It's something very important. I think you'd prefer to hear it privately. Suppose you meet me in an hour or so and have lunch with me? That would be the best way. We could talk very nicely then."

The tone of his voice was indubitably insinuating, sinister. Stella found herself without speech to say yes or no. What did this mean? Dare she refuse to see Vegtel? That was her impulse, that was her desire—to avoid him utterly. There was a long silence.

"I'm still waiting, Miss Beresford," came Vegtel's voice at last.

"Where—where do you want me to meet you?" asked Stella, speaking hardly above a whisper.

She listened a moment longer, and then, intolerably anxious, hung up the receiver. Stumbling with a kind of vertigo, she made her way to her room. Before the glass of her dressing table she started at the reflection of her face. It was blanched and drawn rigid with taut lines.

Nevertheless, a little later, when she met Vegtel, her features were controlled. Her face was still white, but the alarm that made her heart beat painfully was concealed under an outer mask of coldness. The very presence of Vegtel, and her active dislike for the man, aided her in this dissimulation.

As he led her into the restaurant, he endeavored to take her arm, but she stepped quickly aside. They sat down at a table, opposite each other. Looking across at Stella, Vegtel smiled. The obvious expression of disdain in her face gave him a kind of cruel pleasure. He knew he had a

weapon that might quickly soften her mood, that might swiftly tear away the cold mask concealing her emotions.

He derived the same sort of cruel pleasure, too, from his consciousness of her youth and innocent loveliness. It pleased him to think that while his actual purpose was not love-making, his compulsive weapon, should he care to use it in that way, might also have the strength to force this disdainful girl into his arms.

X

"WELL," he said at last, "you've read about Dulcie? A confounded shame! But's that's over. Can't bring back the dead. The rest of us that are alive have to look to our own selves."

Stella was acutely conscious of her heart's harsh beating. What did Vegtel know? What could he know? Why had he summoned her? She had yielded out of intolerable fear—and he must speak now! She could not endure this suave fencing.

"Mr. Vegtel," she said, "I thought you had something to tell me. Whatever it is you have to say, please say it at once. I suppose you understand that that is the only reason I came here."

Vegtel nodded. He smiled ceaselessly. Stella thought again of a cat—a cat toying with a smaller victim.

"I was coming to that, Miss Beresford. Yes, I really have something interesting to tell you. I won't talk any more about poor Dulcie. As I said a moment ago, the rest of us must look out for ourselves. For instance, there's that chap, whoever he was, that's supposed to have come in by the bedroom window. I sort of imagine he's a bit of police bluffing. I kind of doubt the existence of that fellow; but if he's actually hanging around somewhere, I don't doubt he's looking out for *himself*. Then there's that young woman who left the apartment house about ten o'clock in the evening."

He paused, meeting Stella's eyes. Her gaze did not waver, although it seemed to her that every atom of strength in her body was being summoned to steady it. Was it not probable, after all, that Vegtel was guessing? Was it not more than probable that he was trying to trap her into an admission?

"A confounded unpleasant pickle for that poor girl," Vegtel went on, "if her

name should come out! She might be innocent, but of course, as they haven't caught any one else, they'd lock her up. Then it might be tough on her friends."

"I suppose so," answered Stella, still coldly.

"Still, she'd have to be identified. The elevator boy could do that, although he doesn't know her name or who she is."

Again, to Stella, these insinuations, this fencing, became unendurable. Had Vegtel, after all, anything to say? Did he know anything? She drew upon all her courage for a challenge.

"Really, Mr. Vegtel, I'm not at all interested in what you're telling me. If these speculations interest you, surely you can find plenty of people willing to listen to them. Frankly, I'm not willing. If there's nothing more, I think—"

Vegtel raised a restraining hand.

"No, no, Miss Beresford! I'm just coming to a point. You see, the evening poor Dulcie was finished, it happened that I wanted to have a little talk with her. I wasn't sure she'd be at home, but I was in her neighborhood, and I strolled over to the apartment house. I got there about ten o'clock. I was just going in when I saw a young woman coming out. I heard the boy say good night to her. She came out rather briskly—didn't give me a glance. Funny how you can sometimes pass a friend that way, and not know you've done so! That was the way it happened. You came out—"

He was arrested by Stella's eyes, now wide and full of terror, fixed upon his face. Confound it! He didn't want a scene here in the restaurant. She looked as if she was going to scream. He lowered his voice.

"Well, I've been plain, Miss Beresford; but, so far as I know, I'm the only one in the world that knows who that young woman was, and I want you to see right away that there's no reason to be afraid. If any one else knew, it might be tough. You take Mr. Elliot, for instance—it might be as tough for him as for—for you; but, you see, I really am the only one that knows. I guess it won't make you worry any to know that I expect to clear out of this little town in a week or two. I'm going down where it's warm—where the little *señoritas* let the boys play their guitars under the windows. Fact is, I've got a chance to make a nice little deal, just in my line, down in Colombia, and it'll keep

me out of the way for a year or two. By that time they'll have forgotten all about Dulcie Armstrong, poor kid! So I don't want you to be afraid."

All the while he had been speaking Stella, too, had attempted to speak; but her lips had suddenly grown incapable of shaping words. At last the power of whispered speech returned to her.

"What is it you want me to—to do?"

Vegtel elevated his eyebrows in mock surprise.

"You're really willing to do something, little girl? Now that's decent of you! Still, you see, I'm being decent too. I'm going away, and when I'm away you won't have anything to worry you. That is, I want to go away and play this little deal I was speaking of, but I'm a bit short for a stake. I can't play with empty pockets. I really need a little capital. Naturally, if I can't raise it, I'll just have to worry along here in this town; but if I had—well, let's see—I wouldn't need more than ten thousand dollars—I'd jump the first boat south. I've already got my passport, and it's just this question of a little capital that holds me. I was just thinking what a convenience it would be to you if I could make my trip. Then there wouldn't be a single soul in the whole town who saw a certain little girl come out of a certain apartment house at ten o'clock on a certain night."

Ten thousand dollars! This was the price of security, the price of Vegtel's silence! It was the price, Stella told herself, not alone of her own security, but of safety from the ruinous scandal that was poised, like a Damoclean blade, over Sterling Elliot's unconscious head.

She had no money of her own. Her jewels—they would never bring such a sum. There was no one to whom she might turn, save her father. Dare she go to him? Impossible to make a decision now; impossible to think out a plan, while her mind was numbed by the blow of discovery.

But she contrived to speak.

"I—I can't answer you right away, Mr. Vegtel. I really don't have—so much money. You must give me a few days. Talk to me again on Monday. I'll see what I can do by then."

The phrases, as they left her lips, astounded her. Knowing her own innocence, why didn't she sear this low blackmailer with burning words? Why did she promise him anything, lead him to hope for any-

thing? But anger was impossible. It was pitifully necessary to put him off—necessary for her own safety, and, more than that, for the sake of Sterling.

Outdoors again, and alone, she walked with lowered face, vainly seeking some exit from this squirrel cage of unhappy circumstance. Could she go to her father? Yes—it might come to that in the end. If she confessed to him, her poor father would provide the money.

Yet, in spite of her innocence, it was a confession that she passionately shrank from making. How could she tell her father that for more than a month she had been intimate with a notorious woman, and that she was herself known to a blackmailer who had been this woman's confederate? The sordidness of this whole relationship had never been so apparent. Her confession would be like a sudden knife thrust at her father's heart.

No, she could not ask him—not at once, not to-day! Before Monday there was the chance of something happening—something unforeseen that would save her.

And how, after the money was paid to Vegtel, could she be certain of security? He might easily be lying to her. He might easily have no intention of leaving New York.

Then Stella thought of Sterling Elliot.

As long as Vegtel was alive with his secret, whether paid or unpaid, he would be a menace to Sterling. That menace resided in Stella. A part of it, at least, it was in her power to remove. If discovery actually came about, it need not be said that she was now Sterling Elliot's *fiancée*—no matter what might be said of their past relationship.

For a second Stella's eyes were blinded by hot, rebellious tears. The sacrifice was too great! Yet the tears dried, and Stella's new resolve remained.

She was waiting for Sterling that evening. Before dinner, and again after it, she listened for the telephone, half hoping that he might call and say, even at the last moment, that the pressure of his work would prevent him from coming to her. She shrank with continued pain from the ordeal of the evening.

But Sterling did not telephone, and a little after eight o'clock he found Stella alone in the living room. He was smiling as he entered, holding out his hands to her;

but at once his smile vanished at the sight of her blanched face.

"What is it, Stella?"

"I feel very badly this evening, Sterling," she said.

"My poor little girl! What's the matter?" Elliot asked.

He came over to her chair and caressingly put an arm about her shoulder. Gently she took his hand, pushing it away, refusing the caress. He stared at her with a sudden thrill of astonishment. She was murmuring in a halting voice:

"No, Sterling! Don't—don't try to caress me. I can't let you—any more."

"Stella! For the love of God! What do you mean?"

For a second Stella covered her face with tense hands, pressing tightly against her cheeks to keep back a flood of tears. She must not! She must not give way! She must be strong!

The hands were lowered, and she was speaking once more.

"Don't ask me to explain anything to-night. I can't explain anything to-night, Sterling. Some time later—perhaps I can tell you. I just want you to understand one thing now. I want you to let me free, Sterling."

"Free!"

"Yes—you must! I want to break our engagement, Sterling. After to-night I don't want you to see me again." Her voice gained in volume, rose to a more strident tonality. "You must not see me again! No—I mean it! Please, please don't talk to me, don't try to touch me! Please go, Sterling! You must forget me. You mustn't think of me any more!"

On Sterling Elliot's lips there was a flood of anguished protestation, but as his anxious eyes searched Stella's face he restrained it. He could not guess what had happened; but to-night, he saw, it would be cruel to ask. The girl was ill and terribly distraught. He longed to comfort her, to soothe her—but he saw that any effort on his part might hurt more than it healed.

"Stella," he said in a low voice, "something has happened. I'm not going to ask anything about it now. Later you'll be more calm. I'll do what you say—I'll go. I'm doing this because I feel that you need to be alone; but, dearest girl, you can't expect me to take seriously everything you've said to-night. I can't—"

"You must!" came her whisper.

He ceased speaking. Better not to go on; better not to upset her further. For a little while he stood looking down at her figure half crouched in the chair.

"Good night, Stella," he said at last, and turned toward the door.

XI

HAVING summoned all her strength to the making of this sacrifice, Stella was incapable of further action. Later, enough strength might return to her for a talk with her father; but not now!

For the next few days she felt that this whole hideous affair must drift. On Monday she might persuade Vegtel to wait a little longer. She was filled with a sort of blind, half despairing faith. Something would happen! Something would save her!

Meanwhile, it was very difficult to dissemble at home, to conceal all the effect of her distress from her father's eyes. He could not help noticing the whiteness of her face and the purple semicircles under her eyes.

"For several days I've not been feeling well," Stella told him.

"You look tired, child—very tired. I'm glad we're going down to Whibly's place this Saturday. I think it will be restful there."

Another ordeal! But Stella lacked the strength to demur. Perhaps, after all, the week-end of anxieties would pass more easily away from the city. She might be able to forget a little. Julia Whibly was kind, and, although nothing that pressed upon Stella's heart could be confided, it might be soothing to talk with her.

The next morning Stella was summoned to the telephone. It was Sterling.

"Can I see you to-day, Stella? Will you take lunch with me to-day?"

"No, Sterling."

"But I must see you! This evening—I'll run over for a few minutes."

"I won't receive you, Sterling. Nothing has changed. I told you before—you must not see me. I meant it, Sterling."

To spare herself the pain of listening to more of his protestations, she hung up the receiver. Now she was anxious to leave the city. She welcomed the proffered escape. It was heartrending to talk with Sterling, to hear the pain in his voice!

Early the following morning she and her

father set out in a motor for the drive to Whibly's country home. As they passed out of the city, the signs of approaching spring grew insistent. The bare branches of the trees were clustered with swelling buds. Here and there a poplar was fringed with reddish tassels, and in the air there was a warm scent of the fruitful earth. This perfume, and the visual signs of a changing season, made Stella melancholy. They seemed to call for gladness, and she could not be glad.

At Whibly's house, in Julia's company, Stella found herself, as she had hoped, in a measure soothed. Her pain and anxiety were less acute. She sustained herself by a renewal of her fantastic faith that something would happen to save her.

She was still as far as ever from possessing courage to ask her father for a large sum of money. In breaking with Sterling Elliot she had called, it seemed, upon the last reserves of her energies. Now, in spite of the danger, she merely drifted.

On Sunday Julia pleaded with her not to go home that evening. Why couldn't she and Mr. Beresford remain several days longer?

"You'd like to stay, Stella?" asked her father.

Almost with a visible start of relief, Stella nodded.

She had deferred the crisis. When Vegtel telephoned on Monday, expecting his answer, she would not be at home. It was probable that he would telephone. She had promised to meet him, as before, to lunch with him. When she failed to appear, he would call up her home. What a relief to think that she would not be there to talk with him!

In the main, Stella's surmise was accurate. Vegtel did call up her home—but not precisely as she imagined.

On Monday he waited in the lobby of the restaurant long after the appointed hour. At last, frowning, he strolled to the door, assured that Stella was not coming. Then, shrewdly, he began to turn over the possible reasons in his mind.

Certainly, he told himself, he had frightened her enough. She fully understood the scandal that would follow his revelation of her identity. He was thoroughly convinced that she wished, above everything, to have the secret closely kept. Her failure to keep the appointment was not due to indifference, therefore; nor, con-

sidering her fright, could he believe that it was a case of bravado. What then?

Probably, as he saw it, she was finding it difficult to raise the money. Probably she wanted more time, and was afraid to ask for it. Cogitating these things as he walked along the street, Vegtel swung his cane and smiled.

If she needed more time she would probably get out of the way for a few days. That was it—the girl had gone away somewhere for a day or two.

Good enough, thought Vegtel! Still, he must not let her think that he was either sleeping or indulgent. If he could get in touch with her—just for a reminder!

Suddenly he twirled his cane rapidly, with the inspiration of a new thought; and at once he hastened his pace. Coming to the corner, he entered a cigar store and went into one of the telephone booths. He called the Beresfords' number. Presently the maid's voice answered.

"This is the district attorney's office," he said. "Mr. Elliot's secretary calling. Mr. Elliot is in court just now, but he's very anxious to get in touch with Miss Beresford later in the day. He instructed me to call and see if you could tell him how to do so."

Eagerly Vegtel waited for the servant's response. In a second he would know if his structure of surmise was correct. Perhaps the girl was at home all the while. If not, the trick of calling in Elliot's name might gain him the information he needed.

Then, through the receiver, came the maid's response. It was cordial and obliging. Vegtel smiled with satisfaction at his own cleverness when he realized that he had not erred. He carefully noted the name—Whibly; and only a few hours' drive from town! Almost at once a new and more daring plan took shape in his mind.

He hung up the receiver, but stood for a while in the booth, meditating. Evidently the girl was hiding herself for a day or two. For a day or two? He frowned, and a savage firmness compressed his lips. Perhaps she thought he could be put off! Perhaps she intended to keep out of sight from now on!

Vegtel strode out of the booth with an angry swinging of his stick.

That might very well be her intention—to skip out. She was certainly clever enough to know that his secret was not worth a nickel if she could succeed in dis-

appearing. Suppose, from the place where she was hiding now, she really skipped away and hid herself thoroughly! A whispered oath passed Vegtel's lips. Already his plan, in spite of its danger, was formed.

He needed the ten thousand dollars he had demanded as the price of silence. Dulcie's jewels were worth much more than that, but it was too dangerous to negotiate them at present, and he needed cash. He had had a tip concerning a very wealthy man, now living in Cartagena, in Colombia, whose whereabouts the police of New York would like to know. This was work directly in his line; and the prospect of a change of base pleased him.

Yes—he must make sure of his cash and make sure of his victim! It was necessary to show her that escape was impossible, that he was almost occultly watchful. His plan involved a degree of danger, and yet, with decent caution, it need not fail; and Vegtel was accustomed to chances.

An hour later, seated alone in a runabout, he was driving rapidly out toward the country.

And an hour after that, Sterling Elliot was calling the number of Stella's apartment. He had known, of course, of her intention to spend the week-end with the Whiblys; but he knew also that she had expected to return on Monday. Determined to see her, to penetrate the mystery of her actions, he jangled the hook impatiently when the connection was delayed.

"Hello!" he said, speaking to the maid. "This is Mr. Elliot. Please call Miss Beresford to the telephone."

"Why, Miss Beresford hasn't come back, Mr. Elliot. Around noontime I told your secretary how you could reach her."

"What? You told my secretary—"

"Certainly, Mr. Elliot," responded the servant's voice, becoming tremulous with apprehension.

Elliot hesitated for a moment. He knew, of course, that no one from his office had called Stella's number. Then, more calmly, he asked:

"Just repeat to me what my secretary said, and what you said in reply to him."

Thoughtfully Elliot hung up. Another part of the mystery! Some one was seeking Stella's whereabouts—some one who had no hope of getting the information by the use of his own name; and this unknown inquirer knew of a connection between Stella and Sterling Elliot!

For a few seconds longer the young man pondered. Then a determination seized him. Perhaps Stella was in some obscure danger. Even if she were not, there was his own case to plead. After dinner he would drive out to Whibly's. It might be too late to see Stella that evening, but he would then be on hand the first thing in the morning; and now that the Armstrong case was disposed of, there was nothing to keep him in town.

XII

It was already dark when Jack Vegtel reached the village about a mile from Whibly's country place. There he asked a few directions, reentered the runabout, and drove on. In a few minutes he came to the two stone pillars that formed an entrance to Whibly's drive. The house, set back, was hidden by trees.

Vegtel looked up the drive, and then guided his car a few yards farther. Jumping out, he ran back to the drive and turned in; but, instead of following the gravel roadbed, he chose to walk in the shadow of the shrubbery that skirted it. By this means he reached the house unobserved. Crouching behind a clump of rhododendrons, he examined the whole structure with its pleasantly lighted windows.

At this time in the evening, he thought, the occupants would be dressing for dinner. His eyes wandered to the windows of the second floor.

The silhouette of a girl's head passed across one of the luminous squares. Instantly Vegtel recognized its outlines. His victim! By a fortunate chance he had located her room.

At once his plan took on a bolder aspect. Originally he had intended to surprise Stella in some way, but had not formulated the exact means. Now an easy way presented itself. His eye examined the lattice-work that rose from the ground to a point only a few feet below the lighted window. It could be climbed easily, and without noise.

Suppose, later in the evening, when the girl came into her room to go to bed, she found him waiting for her there!

She would not dare to cry out, for that would bring immediate exposure. His unexpected appearance would terrify her. It would destroy her last hope of eluding him. He could renew his demands, with an excellent surety of having them fulfilled.

Slowly he backed out from the rhododendrons, and, skirting the shrubbery once more, returned to his car. In an hour or two he would come back, so as to be sure of reaching Stella's room before she retired. Meanwhile he had plenty of time to go back to the village and get a bite to eat.

When he returned, the moon was up—a condition both favorable and unfavorable. The moonlight would aid him in his climb up the trellis, but at the same time it made him conspicuous. However, it was a chilly evening, and no one indoors was likely to come out.

Hugging close to the shrubbery, Vegtel again reached the concealing clump of rhododendrons, from which he examined the house once more. The light in Stella's room was no longer burning, but the lower floor was fully illuminated. At present every one was downstairs. Vegtel stepped out into the moonlight, moved across the lawn, and cautiously put a foot on the trellis, testing its strength.

Then his alert ears caught the sound of a crunching of footsteps on the gravel driveway. Sharply he turned. A few feet away, on the drive, stood a man, staring at him.

For an instant the two maintained an immobile tableau. Then the tableau was broken by the simultaneous movement of both men. Vegtel, panic-stricken, jumped away from the trellis, and, with a curse, ran swiftly toward the rhododendron bushes. Instantly the other cut toward him in diagonal pursuit.

Vegtel contrived to run sixty or seventy yards before he was overtaken. He heard the pattering rush behind him, and a second later he was conscious of an appalling impact, as if some huge padded weapon had been hurled at his back. He went down sprawling on his face. Then he knew that he had come down with a flying tackle, and that a strong man's arms were wrapped about his waist.

He was too breathless to attempt to free himself; but his antagonist jumped up, and Vegtel was jerked to his feet by the coat collar. A sheaf of letters and papers fell out of his pockets and scattered themselves at his feet.

"Came up just in time, you dog!" grunted his assailant. "Who the devil are you?"

Vegtel's sight cleared, and his eyes fo-

cused on the face of the man who held him in a grasp which he could not shake off. Instantly he recognized his antagonist. It was Sterling Elliot!

Vegtel's cunning mind, working rapidly, recognized the fact that all hope of putting secret compulsion upon Stella Beresford was over; but what of Sterling? He was convinced that Stella's *fiancé* knew nothing of her friendship with Dulcie Armstrong. What would Elliot say to the revelation he now determined to make? Would it be worth anything to Elliot—

He began, still a bit breathlessly, to speak.

"I know you," he said. "Your name is Elliot. I know who you are. Well, I'll tell you who I am—in just a minute. First, I've got something to tell you about that Armstrong case. I know all about the girl that you birds have been looking for. Maybe her name will surprise you. Maybe you didn't know she and Dulcie Armstrong were good friends. Well, I saw her go out of the place on the night of the murder. Her name is Stella Beresford, and—"

He was about to continue when a fist, crashing upon his jaw, sent him sprawling to the earth again. Almost at once Elliot jerked him once more to his feet.

"You rotten blackmailer!" he exclaimed. "Tell me who you are!"

Vegtel was sputtering for utterance.

"My name's Vegtel—Jack Vegtel."

To his astonishment, Sterling Elliot broke into a grim, mirthless laughter.

"Let me hear what you've got to say!" he demanded. "What was it you wanted to tell me about Miss Beresford?"

He listened as Vegtel, cowed and terrified, recited his story; and suddenly he realized that the fellow was telling the truth. In some fashion Stella had met the Armstrong girl, and had been friendly with her. He remembered how eager she had been to know something of the city's hidden life. In some way she had met Dulcie Armstrong, and she had continued the acquaintance out of her naïve and childlike curiosity.

The mystery of Stella's recent actions was now clear to him. He comprehended the sacrifice she had made for his sake. He wanted to be done with Vegtel at once; he wanted to hurry on the instant to Stella. Poor child! Poor little girl! How many insufferable hours had she endured the past few days?

As Vegtel came to the end of his revelation, Elliot seized his arm.

"Now I've news for you, too!" he cried. "I guess you've heard of a man named Braddon? Very well! Now listen!"

In growing amazement, Vegtel heard the full story of his own part in the affair, after he had chanced to find the dead body of Dulcie Armstrong.

Elliot ceased speaking. Vegtel was silent. Then, as Elliot glanced down at the litter of papers at his feet, his eye was caught by a familiar document in a greenish card cover. He stooped, picked it up, and opened it. It was a passport issued to Jack Vegtel.

Then an idea came to him.

"Vegtel," he said, "I have plenty of grounds on which I can lock you up; but just now, for the sake of Miss Beresford's name, I'm going to leave that to some one else. It will probably happen later. A fellow of your sort is almost certain to get behind bars sooner or later. Meanwhile, you've got a chance to clear out. Here's your passport. To-morrow, at noon, there's a steamer of the Dutch line sailing for South America. I don't believe she's crowded. If she is, you'd better get yourself taken on in the stoke hole, if there's nothing better. The point is this—I'm not going to issue any flyers for your arrest until after twelve o'clock to-morrow. If you're in New York after that hour, God help you! You'll get the limit!"

Elliot stood watching as Vegtel hurried down the drive.

XIII

SOMEWHAT surprised at a ring at so late an hour, Whibly's butler answered a summons to the front door. A young man confronted him.

"I'd like to speak to Miss Beresford," he said.

The butler hesitated.

"I don't know, sir. May I have the name, please? I'm not sure if Miss Beresford hasn't retired, sir." He stared again at the stranger. There was something in Elliot's face that reassured him. "If you'll step in a moment, sir," he said.

Elliot stood waiting in the reception hall. Then he heard footsteps on the stairs. It was Stella.

"Sterling!" she cried.

"Stella! There's something I must tell you!"

"No, no! I told you you must not see me again!"

"Grant me this, Stella! After this evening, if you say I'm not to see you again, I won't; but you must let me talk to you this evening. I'm free now. I've nothing but you to think about. The Armstrong mystery was cleared up to-day."

He saw the girl's face go white. Quickly—as quickly as he possibly could—he must put all her intolerable fears to rest; yet he was determined that she should know nothing of Vegtel's visit, or of his own knowledge of her sacrifice.

"Yes," he went on, "I'm through with that. A very strange case, Stella! Dulcie Armstrong was not murdered. This morning a man named Braddon was arrested while trying to snatch a woman's hand bag. When his finger-prints were taken at headquarters, we found them identical with those of the unknown man who was in the Armstrong apartment on the night of Dulcie's death. The fellow gave us the whole story. He had seen exactly what happened. A man named Vegtel was responsible for the appearance of the poor woman's apartment. He was covering up his own theft of her jewels. As for the girl we were looking for, we shan't bother about her any longer. We don't know who she is, but she had nothing to do with the case, according to Braddon's testimony."

Swiftly Elliot proceeded, unfolding the story.

"And as for Vegtel," he concluded, "unhappily the dog got out of our clutches. He managed to skip the country. He's on his way to South America—at least, that's what we think. We know he took out a passport. I doubt if there will be any extradition proceedings. We have too much to occupy us."

He heard, from Stella's lips, a prolonged sigh—the sigh of one who awakens out of a nightmare.

Then, feigning surprise, Elliot exclaimed:

"I've been so full of this case, I've had it so constantly on my mind, that I even talk to you about it, Stella. I didn't come to tell you this. Stella, something has upset you lately. I'm not going to ask you what it is. You needn't ever tell me, if you don't want to; but I know that one thing you've said is not true. You do want to see me again! You can't want to break off now! I don't know your reasons for saying so, Stella. I'm not asking you to

explain them; but I want to help you. I want to be near you. I—"

She had come forward, and now she put a hand on his arm.

"It's all very strange, Sterling," she whispered. "You'll hardly believe it when I tell you. I can tell you now, dear. Yes,

you can know now. The—the danger has gone by. Something—something persuaded me that it would. I'll tell you everything, Sterling dear; but not just now—not just now. Hold me in your arms for a minute, first. I can tell the story better in your arms."

THE END

ON HER OWN TERMS

ON her own terms, O lover, must thou take
The heart's beloved. Be she kind, 'tis well;
Cruel, expect no more. Not for thy sake,
But for the fire in thee that melts her snows
For a brief spell,
She loves thee—loves thee! Though thy heart should break,
Though thou shouldst lie athirst for her in hell,
She could not pity thee. Who of the rose
Or of the moon asks pity, or return
Of love for love? And she is even as those.
Beauty is she, thou love; and thou must learn,
O lover, this:
Thine is she for the music thou canst pour
Through her white limbs, the madness, the deep dream;
Thine while thy kiss
Can sweep her flaming with thee down the stream
That is not thou, nor she, but merely bliss;
The music ended, she is thine no more.

In her, eternal beauty bends o'er thee—
Be thou content;
She is the evening star in thy hushed lake
Mirrored—be glad;
A soulless creature of the element,
Nor good, nor bad.
That which thou callest to in the far skies
Comes to thee in her eyes;
That thou mayst slake
Thy love of lilies—lo, her breast! Be wise;
Ask not that she, as thou, shouldst human be—
She that doth smell so sweet of distant heaven.
Pity is mortal leaven;
Dews know it not, nor morning on the hills;
And who hath yet found pity of the sea,
That blesses, knowing not, and, not knowing, kills?
And sister unto all of these is she,
Whose face as hers none reads, whose heart none knows,
Whose words are as the wind's words, and whose ways—
O lover, learn—
Swerve not nor turn
Aside for prayers or broken-hearted praise.
The young moon looks not back as on she goes;
On their own terms, O lover, girl, moon, rose!

Richard Le Gallienne

Behind the Moonglade

THE STORY OF A MYSTERIOUS NOCTURNAL MEETING AFTER DEATH

By William Dudley Pelley

SURPASSING strange are the social phenomena that a country newspaperman may often be called to confront. Retrospecting, as all of us are bound to do at times, our amazement is not entirely due to the phenomena themselves, or to the fact that over a period of time they should be so numerous. No, what really astonishes is that so many extraordinary, bizarre, and even weirdly exotic climaxes arise in the affairs of neighbors and townspeople whose background, individuality, and daily routine usually epitomize all that is mediocre, prosaic, colorless, and uneventful.

The country scribe is sometimes stunned to realize how near his colorless, abiotic world of food-and-shelter providing, bill-paying, item-collecting activity may walk, day by day and hour by hour, to the unaccountable, the invisible, the supernatural, or—the divine. It makes him wonder whether nature really cares, after all, whether an instrument of some eternal truth resides in a dilapidated little farmhouse out on the Hastings Crossing back road, or in some palace beautiful whose lofty windows look out on the Delectable Mountains.

For instance, and in respect of these foregoing observations, here is the case of Abel Zobisco and his daughter, involving his appearance in town, his mission here, and what happened in a decaying cabin out on the wooded shores of Lake Hathaway one moonlit night of the June which has recently passed.

Explain it if you can. Frankly I confess that I cannot. I had the evidence of my senses, and I can only accept it. You may also find confirmative details in the files of my paper, the *Paris (Vermont) Daily Telegraph*, stacked behind me here

on the green box safe as I write. I give you the dramatic essentials and leave you to draw your own conclusions.

II

LIKE many a prior chronicle of Paris and its people that I have sponsored, a transcript of the Zobisco scientific hoax, if you wish to call it such, encompasses a most vital rôle played by Uncle Joseph Fodder.

Behind our only hotel of consequence up here in the business section of Paris is Uncle Joe's livery stable—a great, roomy old red barn and some carriage sheds forming the southern boundary of a spacious yard. Down in the left-hand front corner of the barn is the hostler's smelly little office. It is furnished with a sheet-iron stove, a desk, a sofa with broken springs, and half a dozen comfortable armchairs. Its walls are hung with livery harness and posters advertising veterinary nostrums for which, through the years, Uncle Joe has been agent.

On droning afternoons, or in quiet summer evenings when a hush falls over the valley, the armchairs are brought out and arranged along the red barn wall. Uncle Joe sits there with his cronies and discusses vital questions of church and State, of love, marriage, and divorce, of town kineology, and of the good old days when the G. A. R. was a power in the land. He can spin voluminous reminiscences of the folk who have done their little term of writhing in our specific can of angle worms and then wiggled away into outer dark. For Uncle Joe is the town patriarch—a venerable Civil War veteran, with a beard like William Cullen Bryant, twinkly blue eyes beneath the wide brim of an old felt hat covered with slits and cobwebs, a wooden low-

er leg, and a mind that seems a cross pollination between Omar of fig tree fame and a scholar and a gentleman.

Through all the intervening years since Uncle Joe came home after losing that leg at Gettysburg, he has conducted the livery behind the hotel; but in the last two decades automobiles have come in, emptied his stalls of horseflesh, and pared down his income. More and more he dozes in the odorous little office or spends the mellow hours of his sunset years tipped back against the outer wall.

Now and then some local person, not sufficiently affluent to own an automobile, or not sufficiently skillful to drive one, comes into the barn and hires a rig for transport to towns, surrounding — especially if the roads be muddy and motor cars cannot "find bottom." In the main, however, Uncle Joe's living comes from feeding the visiting farmers' horses at noontime, and from driving the hearse which Blake Whipple, the undertaker, still keeps at the stable.

Perhaps I scarcely need add that such an establishment is one of the valley's most prolific places for the germination of human dramas. The Zobisco "buried treasure" hoax began and ended there; and I was present at both its inception and its termination.

III

I HAD sauntered into Uncle Joe's office, one night last June, to become embroiled in a heated argument anent a county bond issue with him and Jim Thorne, when across the rainy yard we heard queer, shuffling footsteps approaching. The murky weather had brought the summer darkness early, and the stable's lantern lamps had been lighted. Subsequently the lamp in the office lighted as strange a figure as had ever appeared in Paris.

A man in his fifties I adjudged him to be, tall and loosely jointed, helping himself along by a cane. He was apparently a sufferer from locomotor ataxia, for his knees bent backward at each uncertain step, and his ankles looked swollen; but it wasn't his knees or ankles that we noticed first. It was his hair, his face, his quaint style of dress.

Under a ludicrous English golf cap iron-gray locks fell down to his collar, where they were cut off evenly like a long, masculine bob, and he had an idiosyncrasy of pushing them back to expose his big ears.

The folds of his flesh hung heavy on his face, deeply creased with wrinkles. Something about his mournful blue eyes or that heavy-hanging flesh reminded me of the expression constantly seen in the countenance of a philosophical old St. Bernard dog.

He wore the collar, tie, and black frock coat commonly depicted in chromos of Daniel Webster and Henry Clay. When he spoke, his voice was deep-toned and vaguely musical. He wanted a rig to drive over to Foxboro.

Some time later he drove out of the yard, and Uncle Joe came back to his chair.

"What 'd you find out about him? Who is he?" I demanded, as the old man brought a card of sulphur matches from his unbuttoned vest, split one off, and waited for it to bumble brightly in order to relight his cob.

"Wouldn't tell me his name, but said he wanted to keep the rig out all night. Offered me a deposit for all the mare was worth, in case I was afraid to trust him."

The match flame flared brightly four times as the ancient hostler puffed at his pipe.

"Did you take it?"

"No. Guess he's O. K. Them kind don't swipe rigs. Told me he was more or less of a stranger to the place; got in on the six o'clock train, had his supper to the hotel, and wanted to drive over the mountain on business."

"More or less of a stranger! Just what do you mean?"

"Some time or other he's been here before. Somethin' about that old-dog face o' his that sticks in my memory."

"Didn't say who he was going to visit in Foxboro?"

"No, but seemed a wee bit excited and upset over somethin'. I'll find out more, mebbe, when he comes back."

For a quarter hour we speculated on the stranger, but it came to nothing, and our discussion of the county bond issue was renewed. Outside, the spitting summer rain turned once more to a drenching downfall; then along about half past ten, as Jim and I were about to depart, Jefferson Somers drove into the yard.

Jeff is another liveryman, though his stables are over in Foxboro Center. The significance of the circumstance lies in the intimate knowledge that he and Uncle Joe have of each other's horseflesh.

"Rotten night!" he growled, entering the office and whipping the water from his hat brim. "Man's a fool to be out in it!"

"Come over Haystack Mountain?" inquired Uncle Joe.

"Sure did, worse luck! Mud's awful. Betsy cast a shoe."

"Meet one o' my rigs?"

"Didn't meet no one but Lem Batson in his Ford, workin' out of a bog t'other side o' Purse's. Why? One o' your rigs gone over to Foxboro?"

"Understood so," returned the patriarch, suddenly troubled.

He explained the incident of the picturesque stranger, and computed the time when Jeff should have met up with him on the road.

"Not a sign of him anywhere," Somers contended. "If he'd took the Haystack road, I'd sure have met him."

"Hell's bells!" cried the old liveryman. "I don't like this a little bit. Wouldn't have nothin' happen to that Daisy mare for all the money in Amos Farmer's bank!"

IV

WELL, slight as it may read, that was the beginning of it.

Uncle Joe's worries were groundless. He did not lose his rig. At half past six the next morning, when he came down to his stable, there stood Daisy hitched in one of the empty wagon sheds, with a blanket thrown over her. Her tariff had been settled in advance, so Uncle Joe unharnessed her and led her in to breakfast.

"Come over here and look at this buggy, William," the liveryman invited me, when I dropped into the yard at nine o'clock to learn what had happened.

He led the way to the shed under which the vehicle had been backed, with shafts raised up high and propped with a stick.

"William, there ain't a bit o' the red clay on it such as you find between here and Foxboro, specially around Pump-ton's."

"No—I'd say spokes and wheel rims were covered with loam."

"And on the floor there's twigs and fresh leaves. And look here, in the joints o' the framework around the top—there's prongs o' pine needles still stickin'. William, this buggy's been somewhere in woods!"

"But why in woods in last night's rain? And what woods?"

"That's the mystery, William. That queer old dufer's hidin' his purposes. Wish

to Heaven I could recall somethin' about him that's teasin' me somewhere in the back o' my brain!"

"You think you've known him before?"

"Positive of it, William; but seems a long time ago. He warn't old then. He didn't bother with no cane."

"Daisy all right?"

"Fit as a fiddle. Not a sign o' lather on her, even. Don't seem tired, either, like she was drove far last night."

"Well, you've got your money, so what does it matter?"

The mystery mattered, of course. The hostler was old, and little things interested—or fretted—him. He fretted over the stranger and his nocturnal destination all day. He fretted, I say, until along in the shank of the second evening, when the enigmatic cripple shuffled into the yard and wanted Daisy again.

"Where you drivin' this mare o' mine?" demanded Uncle Joe testily. "You didn't go over to Foxboro last night, and you know it!"

"I did go to Foxboro—not into the village, perhaps, but I went into Foxboro township."

"You didn't go by the main road around Haystack Mountain!"

"No, perhaps I didn't; but what does it matter? You're in the business of renting rigs, aren't you? Your mare was returned to you undamaged, wasn't she? Isn't it permissible for a person to go privately about his business up here without having to explain that business to the whole community?"

And, try as he would, short of refusing the rig, Uncle Joe could get no more satisfaction. He had to see Daisy trot out of the yard a second time without knowing her destination.

"B'gad, William, he looked more nervous and upset than the night you saw him," the hostler explained to me afterward. "Like as if he was laborin' under some tremendous strain. And what do you know, William?—he had a lantern and a broom with him, this time, in addition to his cane!"

The third night, when the same rig had been hired by the same man, Uncle Joe came clumping into my newspaper office and cried:

"I think I've solved the mystery, William. That old dufer's huntin' buried treasure!"

"Buried treasure! What makes you think so?"

"There was a shovel in the buggy this mornin', William—and a bar."

"No!" I declared, after a moment's cogitation. "I hate to spoil your hypothesis, Uncle Joe, but I doubt it. Men hunting buried treasure don't deport themselves so openly or so suspiciously. They don't leave their muddy tools in rented buggies to cause village gossip."

"William, somethin' ails that old coot. He ain't actin' natcheral."

"I'll grant you that, but it isn't buried treasure. If you came to me with the suggestion that he might be interring a dead body somewhere, or digging one up, I might give the idea some credence."

"Well, he's at the snappin' point with some kind of suspense."

"It isn't buried treasure, Uncle Joe. He isn't that type of darned fool."

I thoroughly believed this, and my conviction didn't alter when it was duly reported by the patriarch that for a fourth and a fifth time Daisy had been hired by the stranger and kept away till daylight.

On the sixth day Uncle Joe reached the office with color high.

"I'm right, William—right as Tophet! He is after buried treasure somewheres. *He told me so himself!*"

"Joseph Fodder, I'm surprised you're so gullible. Do you think for a moment that if he was, he'd broadcast it to you or to any one, so that a whole town might follow at his heels and help him dig?"

"William," the old hostler returned doggedly, "that man ain't in no condition to spoof or talk riddles. I never said a word to put the idee in his head. I just made it plain he couldn't have Daisy no more unless he told me how far he drove her nights, and where. Then he looks at me a long time with them queer eyes of his and says: 'Call it, if you want, that I'm hunting, hunting, hunting, for a buried treasure'—just like that. So now!"

"He's gone again?"

"Yes—somethin' about him made me let him have Daisy once more. He seems gettin' attached to her, even if he ain't just right in his head. The way she nickered when she heard his voice convinces me he's been givin' her sugar—"

Uncle Joe stopped. My telephone bell had blared. Over the wire, when I answered, came the voice of Deak Winslow,

the town derelict, who sometimes tends stable for Uncle Joe during mealtimes.

"Fodder there?" Deak demanded.

"Yes. You want him?"

"Tell him to come back to the stable, quick. There's a woman over here that wants to see him on somethin' urgent—about that man who's got Daisy."

"A woman! Who is she?"

"Won't give her name. Seems all fussed up, and white as a ghost."

I conveyed the message to Uncle Joe, and, after a moment's blank thought, he stamped his way out. I continued about my work; but before long—twenty minutes or half an hour later, perhaps—once more the telephone whirled.

"William, this is Fodder. Can you spare the time to come over to the stable?"

"What for? What's up?"

"Can't tell you till you get here, William; but your advice is wanted."

Later I learned that my counsel was thus commandeered in order to keep any distressing detail which might ensue from becoming public property by way of my newspaper.

Well, I went over to Uncle Joe's office; and thus I met Clara Van Buren.

The minute I caught sight of Uncle Joe's eyes, I knew that the latest developments were pregnant with drama. The hostler's face was remarkably pale—as pale as the woman's. Seated across from her, he was stroking his white beard reflectively. When I entered, he looked in my face for a long moment without speaking.

"William, this here's Mrs. Van Buren," he finally announced. "The man who's been takin' Daisy out, last five or six nights, is her daddy."

V

A WOMAN between twenty-five and thirty years old occupied one of the armchairs in the livery office—all male loafers having been summarily ejected. She was dark-eyed, small-bodied, ultra feminine. Fine-spun chestnut hair was fluffed about her shapely forehead and temples. She wore no hat, but her full-length blue serge cape had a hood, which was dropped back on her pretty back.

"William," began the old man, when the usual conventionalities were over, "you know I claimed the man who's been rentin' Daisy was huntin' buried treasure?"

"Yes. What about it?"

"It ain't *money*, William. It ain't any sort o' buried treasure you'd think of in a thousand years; yet I got to admit, as the lady here says, it is buried treasure of a kind. William, that old man's huntin' for his wife, Mrs. Van Buren's mother!"

It jolted me, of course. I glanced at the tense, hectic features of the girl.

"She's buried somewhere?" I gasped.

"She's buried out in our family lot in the cemetery at Hillville, Illinois," Clara Van Buren affirmed.

"And your father's hunting for her body here, somewhere around Paris?"

What sort of gruesome human drama was I up against now, I wondered?

"Her body?" said Mrs. Van Buren. "No, no! That's buried, as I said. He's hunting for her spirit."

"With a broom, a shovel, and a bar?"

"Not perzactly, William," Uncle Joe corrected. "This lady tells me he's only been usin' them tools to clean out and slick up the cabin over to Hathaway."

"What cabin over at Hathaway?"

"You remember that hut in Babcock's Grove, don't you? Most of the deer hunters does."

"There's one on the west shore of the lake, where you turn in from Trimble's; but it's mossy, and old, and falling apart."

"That's the one. Mr. Zobisco's been keeping watch over there the past week—after slickin' the place up—watching for his wife to come back. That's what the lady here tells me."

"Zobisco!" I cried.

Where had I heard the name before? A wrestling champion had one something like it, I recalled. Still, I didn't seem to associate—

Then my brain seemed to galvanize, and memory came clear. I stammered in amazement:

"Your mother can't be the Chicago lady the papers reported a while ago as losing her life in the course of some experiments with Beta rays?"

"Yes," the girl nodded, tersely, significantly. "Father and mother spent most of their married lives experimenting together in physics and chemistry. Lately they've been carrying along some of the investigations of Rutherford, Clerk-Maxwell, Crookes, and Bragg."

"But she died from—"

"Some of mother's burns caused cellular injuries which finally ended her life.

Father is afflicted in a similar way—you've probably noticed his walk—but not in so advanced a state."

"But what's he doing up here in Vermont?" I inquired.

"Mother was a Vermont girl, and for a long time she taught school in South Foxboro to help pay for her education at Columbia. She met father there. He's of Polish extraction. That was thirty years ago. Of course, atomic research was in its infancy then, and the electrons of the ultra-violet rays hadn't been heard of at all. The two were first brought together by their studies in biology. Mother won a scholarship for her work on parasitic plant life. As soon as they graduated, they were married."

"Haven't I read, in connection with your mother's death, that your father recently won some big European prize for a scientific discovery?"

"You mean the Baroque Award in psychic science—yes. He first demonstrated the physical readjustments in mediums during telekinesis."

The way the girl spoke these terms, as if Uncle Joe and I would know what they meant, indicated that she was no mean student herself.

"You see," she went on, leaning forward and interlacing her sensitive fingers, "father's and mother's long and intimate work in connection with the galvanism of electrons came to convince them, in time, that as mind is only a form of energy, and electrons—or electric energy, from which all atoms are composed—can move about independently of matter, then it must follow that mind can exist independently of matter. While mother was carrying on the electronic research that killed her, daddy was following out the practical application of the electron to the life principle—whatever that may be; and that's how they came to make their rather eerie agreement, which has finally brought father back East to Vermont."

"What eerie agreement?" I asked.

"For months before her death mother knew that she had been stricken, and that the end was only a matter of time; so she made a compact with father. She would prove with him whether mind exists independent of matter by keeping a post-mortem tryst with him during the week of the thirtieth anniversary of their marriage, in the old Vermont woods cabin where they

had passed their honeymoon as young biological students—if *she could*.”

VI

THE goose pimples began to shiver up and down my spine. They had plenty of exercise that evening, however. It was about a quarter past seven when Uncle Joe summoned me over. At half past nine the daughter was still talking and explaining—and leaving me dumfounded.

“I don’t call *that* very scientific,” I declared at length, when she had told us her plans. “Why, it’s nothing but a hoax!”

“Yet a hoax for a noble, constructive purpose. Besides, as I said, in case she hadn’t appeared on any one of the first six nights, mother herself wanted me to do it on the seventh night. For months since mother’s death, father has thought, talked, and dreamed of nothing but the coming possibility of seeing her again in that cabin of their honeymoon. I’m thinking of what effect failure will have on him mentally, and on the continuance of his life work. For five nights now he has remained up there all alone in the summer dark, keeping that pitiable tryst. Don’t you imagine that if my mother existed in any position or status where she could have done so, she would have materialized immediately upon her death? Why wait for months, anticipating a meeting in some dilapidated woods cabin, far away here in the Green Mountains? No, it’s plain that some scientific principle is at work of which we know nothing as yet, prohibiting mind from demonstrating itself apart from matter. Mother *can’t* communicate with him, granted that she is an existing principle anywhere; so I believe I’m thoroughly justified in doing what I’ve proposed. I came in here to get a rig to follow father to-night, and my talk with Mr. Fodder led me to believe that it might be best to take some one along with me, in case of any mishap. He, in turn, suggested you.”

“But supposing you do play this rôle, won’t you be making out their life work to be a lie? I’m surprised that your mother, with her training for truth and scientific accuracy, would propose it!”

“Look at it positively. Supposing he thinks he has met mother. Not only will he go onward zealously with his researches, for the little time he still has to live, and perhaps really stumble on something of value, but all fear of death will leave him.

He’ll have had proof enough to convince a lonely, grieving old man that his wife and comrade has made the journey across the bridge in safety, and is waiting for him in some matterless state on the other side. I think mother’s desire was really based on the fact that she wanted to stimulate father to further researches, as well as to buoy him up in his sorrow. I’ve thought it over and over during the last few months, and I’ve come to the conclusion that it’s a decent, compassionate thing to do.”

“But he’ll immediately publish it to the world, won’t he? And if it goes down in scientific annals, coming from a man of your father’s prestige, we shall all be participants in a vicious fraud.”

“No, I don’t think he’ll publish it. If he were making it purely a scientific test, for universal proclamation later, he would take care to have witnesses present—something to substantiate his claim; but the whole matter is far too intimate and dear to him to adopt any such cold, impersonal expedient. He wants to know it *himself*! Because of that, and because she may have had her own reasons, which she didn’t explain to me, I’m determined to go up there and take mother’s place. I’m about her build, and I resemble her in appearance so closely—as she looked at my age—that father will never perceive the difference, especially if it all happens in moonlight. I’ve brought mother’s wedding dress to add to the illusion. I’ve got it here in this suit case.”

I looked across at Uncle Joe in amazement. Weird complications I had encountered during twenty-eight years as a newspaper publisher; but surely this was the weirdest of all.

“You actually think you can act the part realistically enough to deceive the man of science that he must be?”

“If I wasn’t reasonably certain, I wouldn’t attempt it.”

“He might ask embarrassing questions.”

“I’ll parry them somehow. After all, it’s the materialization that matters. I feel it will make him a changed man if he goes back to his laboratory in Chicago believing that his wife is continuing in some concrete form after death, and can remember to keep their meeting.”

“But supposing he tries to embrace you—at least to touch you? He’ll know you’re *real* then, won’t he, and the hoax will come out?”

"I'll take care that he doesn't. I know what my rôle must be. He doesn't dream that I'm within fifteen hundred miles of Vermont—and he mustn't. It's going to be bright moonlight to-morrow night. One of the reasons why outside help is advisable is that some one must be with him before I try to enter the cabin, and must make certain that the lantern is extinguished, so that I can't be discerned too plainly."

"What would be your plan of operation?" I inquired.

"To-morrow evening is the last night of the tryst week. After father has secured his rig, and driven off to the lake, you and Mr. Fodder and I will follow in another buggy. When we reach the woods—Mr. Fodder tells me that they skirt the lake almost down to the shore—you two go on ahead on foot, and get into the cabin with father. I'll change into mother's old wedding dress in the shrubbery, and, when the lantern is extinguished, I'll follow. The whole materialization will take only a few moments. When I've shown myself, and said whatever I think proper—mother told me something of what to say—I'll leave, and meet you again at our buggy. If anything should happen to compel you to bring father back with you, I'll follow in the rig he has out there now. Then, without his knowing, I'll leave town on the midnight train. I'll get back to Chicago and Hillville ahead of him, and the whole affair will always be a secret between the three of us."

"Sounds plausible," said Uncle Joe.

I laughed nervously, wishing that I might light my pipe, to cogitate upon the hoax with the assistance of some good tobacco. I remained in the stable office, however, long after the girl had departed. She wouldn't tell us where she was staying that night, but it wasn't at the hotel, where her father might see her.

"Well," I sighed finally, "what do you think of it?"

"It's fraud, William—there's no doubt about that; but then, again, it's fraud when you go into a sick room and tell ailing folks they're lookin' fine, when really they may be lookin' next thing to a corpse."

"You mean the end here justifies the means?"

"Yes, William, I think so. After all, that sweet girl is only doin' this out o' love

for her pa, and because she don't want him hurt too badly at finding that her ma can't deliver."

"You think we should assist her?"

"By gum, I know she'll go to that lake to-morrow night anyhow; and, fraud or not, I'm goin' to be on hand to see what happens there."

VII

FINER, fairer, more exquisite June nights may have descended over the Green Mountains than the evening which ensued; but, if so, I fail to recall them.

A vast, salmon-colored moon lingered complacently above the spruce-cloaked summit of hoary old Haystack Mountain as we left the Green River covered bridge and the lights of Paris behind us, about half past nine, and mounted into the verdant country on the west side of Cobb Hill. Faint cloudlets, of pink, gold, and mauve, had hung above the sunset in the afterglow; but with the coming of deeper evening they had dissolved into Prussian blue and starlight.

As we drove along on our eerie errand, through woods where the trees met overhead, scents of dew-moist clover, wood betony, evening primrose, and wild columbine drugged the air like an opiate. When we came out along pasture land and meadow, the Milky Way arched above us like a distant, heavenly fog.

We passed McDermott's abandoned lumber job and the Purse place. Now and then we turned out for oncoming automobiles, whose headlights blinded us; but for the most part we jogged along in moist, vibrant, sweet-scented night. Occasionally we startled grazing cattle turned out for the night on the other side of pasture fences. Night insects zoomed about our ears. The steel tires of the double buggy clicked in the sand, and, when the two horses slowed down to a walk for the hill grades, the whiffletrees creaked pleasantly behind them.

Just beyond the Siebert deer bottom we turned into the Hathaway back road. Few words passed between us. I fell to watching the ghostly cones of the swamp spruces against the star-pricked western sky, where the last glimmer of the afterglow had died to blue iron. I rode on the front seat beside Uncle Joe. Mrs. Van Buren, tense with the strain of the coming ordeal, sat behind with her hand bag, her cape hood

fallen back, her fine hair blowing delicately in an occasional breeze.

I noted that she had dressed her hair differently to-night. It was parted on one side, and drawn down in the back to three short curls behind her right ear. Elusively I recalled the portrait of a maiden aunt in an old photograph album, showing just such an arrangement.

It was after ten o'clock when we reached the deserted Trimble farm, and saw the bars already down ahead of us in the lane leading eastward toward the lake. Uncle Joe turned the horses in, and for another ten minutes they pulled us at a walk over hummocks and half buried bowlders, till we reached the woods skirting the lake shore. Thence a log road led on to the water.

As we finally stopped the horses beneath a great sugar maple in these woods, from somewhere ahead sounded Daisy's sharp nicker in greeting. One of our horses answered back, and Uncle Joe swore softly under his breath. However, in view of the fact that we expected to present ourselves at the cabin within a few minutes, it couldn't make such a difference.

Mrs. Van Buren required no assistance in alighting from the vehicle. She was down from the rear seat almost as soon as I reached the knobby forest ground myself—nearly rolling my ankle as I did so. She lifted out the hand bag, which bulged with the old wedding dress.

"I'll change right here," she declared, her painfully constricted voice indicating the emotion under which she labored. "You two go on ahead. You'll see me come along the shore as soon as I'm properly dressed. I want to look as nearly like mother as possible, as she did that wedding week, thirty years ago."

Uncle Joe tied the horses, and along the log road we wound—the moonlight guiding us where it filtered down through the branches of maples, yellow birch, basswood, and jack pine, with here and there a shag-bark hickory or cedar. In another handful of minutes the vast, star-mirrored expanse of Lake Hathaway stretched somnolently before us. The mammoth moon—slowly evolving from salmon to gold, from gold to platinum, as it lifted serenely up the sky—made a great molten highway of moonglade from the misty shadows of the opposite shore, straight down to our feet.

"God, ain't it pretty?" choked Uncle Joe—like a prayer. "Wouldn't mind comin' here to meet Jennie to-night, as I knowed and loved her forty year ago!"

Jennette was his wife, dead these eighteen years.

A slight wind was rippling the water as we turned southward in the direction of the abandoned cabin, following the line of shore. A hundred feet farther on Daisy nickered again from where she was tied and blanketed beneath a beech tree. A faint yellow iridescence came from the sashless window holes of the rickety cabin where the old Polish scientist kept his tryst with one whose voice was as a song that is sung.

He must have heard Uncle Joe's big boot come down and snap a dry stick, for he was standing out on the cabin's broken porch when we finally came up.

"Evenin', neighbor," greeted the liveryman. "Don't be scairt. It's only me—Joe Fodder—and a friend."

The physicist's cap and stick were back in the lantern-lit depths of the cabin. He had shuffled out to the porch without them, and stood there holding to a paling, the night wind off the lake rippling his iron-gray locks and his coat tails.

"Why have you come here?" he demanded almost petulantly.

"Followed to see what you did with my mare," contended Uncle Joe, technically within the truth.

"I—want—to—be—alone!"

"Waitin' for some one?" My companion stopped before the scientist, hooking his big thumbs in the button pieces of his suspender.

"Yes, I'm waiting for some one," said Abel Zobisco. "It's the last night. Take your horse, if you must, and go back; but leave me alone!"

"Pshaw, now, we ain't come to bother you none! Just let's be sociable."

"Any other time, sir—not to-night. For God's sake, go!"

Dignity had taken the place of petulance, but the old man's nerves were at snapping point. Perhaps his daughter knew the effect of all this on her father far better than we gave her credit.

Uncle Joe had abetted the affair thus far, and he felt he should go the whole way.

"See here, stranger," said he. "Who you aimin' to meet out here to-night—in

a place where nobody ever comes by moonlight but ghosts?"

"You want the truth? I'm here to meet a ghost, sir."

"Well, I know somethin' about the ghost that's supposed to haunt this cabin lately," the beloved old intriguer fabricated. "You're drivin' off two mighty good friends who might help you."

"A ghost—has been haunting—this cabin?"

"Yep—lady's ghost. Old-fashioned sort o' lookin' woman. Three curls to the back of her neck—"

"My God!"

The scientist swayed for a moment on his crippled legs, but he did not fall. His dignity became more pompous than before. He controlled his feelings with a mighty effort.

"S'pose we all go inside and sit a piece," suggested Uncle Joe. "Warn't it you, stranger, who come up to this cabin on your honeymoon, thirty year ago?"

Old Abel suffered us to go inside. We saw how the place had been cleaned.

"Let's put out the light," the hostler suggested. "Spirits don't never show up by lamplight. Thought o' that?"

Without further permission, he extinguished the lantern; and the open cabin door and the mounting moon were in such juxtaposition that the moonglade was deep and unfathomable before us, far off into acres of dreams.

VIII

SHALL I ever forget that dramatic wait in the decaying little structure off there in the forest and the night?

After a time the scientist was wheedled into talking. He was really heartsick to talk with some one; and, when we listened sympathetically, he unburdened his heart. If I had any repugnance for the hoax, it was dissolved away as his suffering, mellow voice concluded:

"Thirty years we lived together, worked together, took our play together, gentlemen—thirty long years! In all that time, not one night did we spend away from each other. Not a single cross word ever passed our lips. It was one of those unions you read about in poetry, gentlemen. Looking back upon it now, I realize that every hour of it was a golden moment, and time but something to pass away. She was part of me, gentlemen, and I felt that I was part

of her. We made the perfect whole. And then, gentlemen, she was taken away from me. Life has been lonely since—very, very lonely. Nothing seems worth while. Somehow, until I know she hasn't wholly perished, I can find no incentive to work. Oh, Martha, Martha! If you can come to me, come, come!"

He never got further. His great dog-like eyes were suddenly fixed on the opened door. Seated directly in line with it, his elbows forward on his knees, he seemed suddenly jerked rigid.

We turned our faces and followed his gaze. We, too, became rigid.

Up from the lake shore, straight in line with the open door, a figure was approaching in the moonlight. A woman was moving out there in the night!

So filmy she appeared, at first, that we might easily have imagined she had originated from the moonglade, or behind it. Small-bodied, dark, and fine she was—when we beheld her mounting closer. Her exquisite figure was enveloped in an old-fashioned dress of challis, basque-waisted, lace-trimmed, with skirt of paniers and serried overdapes. The great leg-of-mutton sleeves might have been ludicrous on any other woman, in any other setting, but not on her—not now.

A portrait from an album, misty with the corrosions of time and perfumed with the scents of long ago, she came steadily nearer to the opened door, with the moonglade always behind her. She belonged to it, that moonglade. If I hadn't known her to be the daughter in the flesh, I believe I would have cried out in terror and bolted.

I realized that the scientist's lips were moving. Words were being whispered whose import I could not determine.

With never a break of a twig, so light was that woman's footstep, without the slightest audible sound, she reached the front of the cabin and halted. Down from her right wrist something dangled on ribbons. Uncle Joe said, later, he remembered that the women back in the eighties called them dewdrop bonnets.

She was a canvas for an artist as she stood there, seeming to be summoning the strength to go further; and in that tableau, with three pairs of male eyes riveted glassily upon her, the aged scientist at last found his tongue.

"Martha!" he called—a vibrant, poignant cry, haunting with its mellowness.

The woman against the moon-glade turned slowly. Then, softly as the night wind ruffling the water, came her voice in response:

"Abel! Are you here, Abel?"

Was he there, indeed? He made to rise and go toward her, but Uncle Joe held him.

Up on the broken porch the vision stepped, crossed closer to the door, and stood there in ethereal silhouette. Slowly around that crude little place a sweet, exotic perfume seemed to permeate that was not of the forest night—a scent I could not name.

"Martha! All the week, each night, I waited. You've been a long time coming, dear!"

"But, Abel dear, I promised I would come."

It was very quiet in that cabin of other years. Just outside the open window hole at the scientist's left, the passing night wind stirred the fronds of a clump of wild raspberry. Down by the lake shore the deep *gut-a-chunk* of a bullfrog paragraphed the stillness. But for these sounds of nature, and our labored breathing, there was silence for a moment.

"If you hadn't come to-night," said old Abel, "I could hardly have faced the morning, Martha dear! Everything we had ever done would have seemed so shallow and vain!"

The eyes fixed upon her shape against the moon-glade were the eyes of a scientist, I knew; but the voice was the voice of a lover begging his beloved to draw near, that he might possess her.

"Oh, Abel dear, it was so hard to come—so hard to step back! And yet I had to let you know that all was well."

I heard all this like voices that sound in dreams. What was the matter with me? The drama of the thing had possessed me like a drug—a case of emotional exhaustion, doubtless.

"It's true, then, Martha?" said Abel. "We do not die? Mind *can* exist apart from matter?"

It might have been five seconds later, it might have been five hours, but the silhouette a dozen feet away replied softly, playing her rôle like the expert she was:

"Have we worked so long together, Abel dear, not to have learned that nothing dies, that death is a man-made term, that nothing can go out of existence—a moth or a mountain, a flower seed or a star—that

what we once called death, you and I, is only chemical change from form to form? When nothing in nature is ever lost, not the faintest motion or smallest atom, how can any one who has read down the pages in the Book of Life believe that the spirit of man is the only exception? What were we in the flesh but trillions of units of electronic energy? And how could nature's hair balance be preserved if we did not lay our bodies down, as everything in nature lays its body down, that new creations might arise, new starts, new shapes, new cells, new perfections? Oh, Abel, if I might only raise you to see! If I only could!"

"See what, Marty dear?"

He spoke as he might once have asked her some casual question as he bent over her shoulder in their laboratory.

"What I see, Abel—what I know now! For we have to change, dear Abel, or we would break that hair balance of the natural world. Everything that has ever lived has known that wonderful change. The life of the universe feeds upon it; but there is no pain, dear Abel—just peace, and keen new aspiration."

"Martha dear! Come close! Let me touch you!"

"You couldn't, Abel dear. We thought life rich when attuned to earthly matter; but it's finer, fairer, Abel, raised beyond the handicap of sense. I came back to-night just for this little time, that you might know, and that it might help you, dear. Now I must go on. The greater work is waiting. You are to know it, too, sooner than you dream. Do not fear! Face it gladly! For after each night comes a morning—that is the balance. There is always a springtime to follow the winter, for that is the balance also. Greet the change. Welcome it joyously, for soon you will know, as every living thing has learned, that *death is more wonderful than life!*"

The moon-glade rippled into spaces beyond the senses, where all our little unborn wishes go. Night insects rose and fell on the ozone. Somewhere a sleepy bird twittered. I thought I heard a whippoorwill far off in the direction of North Foxboro.

The woman stepped back lightly upon the broken porch. I saw her turn her face upward toward the moonlight, beautifully. Her lips moved. As if soliloquizing to herself, she breathed:

"Stars shine and new worlds are born—

and *what* worlds! Gases cool and form rocks and water. In the water come seeds of life that crawl to the land. Summer winds blow and scatter those seeds, and æon by æon they flower. Plants and creeping things—brethren under the sunlight—they have their little time, and then they return to enrich the earth. There come strong men; but the change descends upon them also, to complete the cycle of nature, and they go their ways. The whole universe is nothing but eternal energy, all of it, where no star dust is lost, no breath is squandered. I cannot stay and grieve with you, Abel. There is nothing about which to grieve."

IX

UNCLE JOE was cursing softly to himself as he fumbled to light the refractory lantern.

"Hold him tight, William! It's been too much for him. Damn it, 'twas almost too much for me! He's fainted, I guess."

The lantern was burning once more. I had the old scientist by the shoulders, to steady his body, but his head had dropped forward. Uncle Joe at length ran a great gnarled hand in over his heart.

"Uncle Joe! For God's sake, he isn't—"

"Go fetch his daughter back. It's done for him, William. We'd ought to 'a' thought o' that, too!"

I got into clumsy motion, and out into the moonlight. The daughter had gained the log road some distance ahead of me. When I came up, I found that she dropped down on the ground, near one of the wagon wheels. At least, she was already seated there, and had swung the long blue cape over the old-fashioned dress.

"Come quick!" I cried despairingly. "It was too much, Mrs. Van Buren! Your father really thought he saw his wife, it was so realistic. As you went down the shore, he tried to follow, and—collapsed."

"You mean he's—"

"Hurry up! Don't you understand? Your father's collapsed—been stricken—his heart wasn't able to stand—what's the matter with you?"

The daughter uttered a queer cry and clutched for me.

"Matter with me? I don't know what you're talking about. I'd no sooner got into this dress than I turned my ankle on one of these hummocks, and I think it's sprained. Anyhow, I haven't stirred from this spot in the past half hour."

Off by the distant moonglade, I heard Daisy's curious nicker.

AFTER DROUTH

THE world is filled with the sound of rain—

Rain at dawn of a summer day;

Water falling in nervous rushes,

Water calling in sudden bushes,

Water hurrying, aware of delay,

Scurrying, flurrying,

Seeking to give an efficient impression;

Rustling and bustling and hustling, well knowing

Its negligent flood is long overdue,

And the mark of its carelessness plain to the view.

The world is full of the chill of rain—

Rain at end of a torrid drouth;

Coolness quenching the sun's insistence,

Coolness wrenching the heat's resistance,

Coolness dallying with winds of the south,

Rallying, sallying,

Almost retreating, but turning repentant;

Blessing, caressing, redressing, and healing.

So follows the crystal coolness of rain

Like a kiss after quarrel, a kiss after pain!

Nelle Richmond Eberhart

A Hundred Years from Now

AN INCIDENT OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN A NEWSPAPER OFFICE

By Oliver P. Newman

HENRY COOLEY glanced up from beneath his green eye shade as the door of the local room opened. He saw a tall, thin young man in a shiny old raincoat slip quietly in and turn toward the city editor's big flat-topped desk, recognizable to any reporter because of its beautiful disorder. He watched the stranger shake the snow off his hat, throw his coat back to make its worn collar lie down, and run a bare hand, blue-white from cold, across a face on which grew a three days' beard.

Cooley slowly pulled off his eye shade and leaned back in his creaking chair as the young man picked his way over the debris of copy paper, cigar and cigarette stubs, broken old cuspidors, and torn parts of newspapers, with which the floor was littered. His path wound in and out among the battered old desks and chairs, above which were two or three flickering gas jets and half a dozen bulbs scattered through a crude tangle of electric light cords, loosely tied together with dirty string; but he proceeded confidently toward his goal, like a man who knew just where he was going and what he wanted when he got there.

"Howdy?" said Cooley, before the stranger could speak.

"Good evening," the visitor replied, his dark eyes lighting up brightly in his sallow face at the cordiality in the other's greeting. "My name's Schooler. What's the chance of a good man getting on here for a week or two?"

Cooley looked his man over, and read Schooler's whole story at a glance. He had seen Number Six—due to pass through the town but a few minutes earlier—slide noisily into the yards, her locomotive capped with a clinging white headdress of snow, and her brake shoes spitting fire upon the icy ties, while a slender figure in

an old raincoat dropped quietly off the front platform of the baggage car, shook itself to get its bearings, looked about, saw a ten-foot electric sign, "The Burlingham Morning Globe," half a mile away, and turned toward it with instinct as true as a homing dove.

Cooley knew that the brilliant name of his paper, flaring out into the night from the top of the tumble-down old building which the *Globe* continued to occupy because of sentiment and tradition, despite the paper's material success, was a nightly invitation to that little army of delightful irresponsibles usually referred to by after-dinner speakers as the "gentlemen of the press." Tradition—and Henry Cooley—had made that sign mean a warm bed, a square meal, an assignment, a story to get, to write, and to be paid for; perhaps a salaried position, and at least a railroad pass to the next good newspaper town, for Cooley's time was back in the good old days when the anti-pass law was as yet a vague shadow in the distance.

"We're pretty well filled up right now," Cooley said; "but maybe something 'll turn up. Where you from?"

"Omaha, but it's dead there now."

"How you traveling?"

"Lower case."

"H-m! Well, I guess I can give you an assignment to-night."

Cooley looked Schooler over again quickly. He slipped one hand into his spacious trousers pocket and fingered the silver dollar, the quarter, and the nickel he found there. It was all he had left from his week's salary, and pay day was three days off. Suddenly he hitched his chair forward with a bang, pulled the big assignment book over toward him, and scanned the hieroglyphics that appeared upon its open page.

"How you fixed financially?" he asked, without looking up.

"I'm dead broke," Schooler promptly replied.

"H-m! When did you eat?"

"Yesterday morning, at the farm where the freight conductor put me off the train I was on before I got the Chicago Flyer to-night."

"Well, I've got something for you. Old Colonel Rutledge, the theatrical magnate, is in town to-day. Came clear out here to see his 'Happy Widower' company, and he's giving them a big feed on the stage to-night, right after the show. We want a good human-interest story on it. You can go strong, because there'll be plenty of good stuff in it—poor, hard-working actresses, away from home and mother on a bitter winter night, with nothing to eat but lobster and nothing to drink but champagne. We can stand two columns of it, if you get it in by one o'clock, or a little after, and make it real sentimental stuff."

"I'll be glad to do it," said Schooler.

"All right! Better be there about eleven. In the meantime, make yourself at home. There's a bunch of exchanges over there. Probably find some Omaha papers, if you want to see them."

II

SCHOOLER had been reading the exchanges for half an hour when the door opened hesitatingly and a bent, shrunken figure slunk timidly into the room.

At first glance the man appeared to be very old, but closer inspection, especially of his wonderfully bright eyes, showed that he was hardly fifty. He wore no overcoat, in spite of the bitter winter night. His coat, vest, and trousers were of different hues and patterns, and plainly showed marked differences in age, although all seemed to have outworn their usefulness long before. The soiled edges of what had once been a dress shirt encircled his thin, white neck, and a similar fringe hung about his bony, chapped wrists. No collar or tie adorned his throat, from which came frequently a rough cough. His sodden shoes were of the same general character as his clothes, and little rivulets of water oozed from them when he walked.

The old man looked furtively about the room. Then he sidled up to Cooley's desk, leaned over the city editor's shoulder, and whispered in his ear.

Cooley did not look up, but nodded slowly, and kept on turning over the sheets of copy in front of him. Presently his right hand stole under the table. His body straightened slightly in his chair, and his right shoulder humped itself up under his ear, as a shoulder does when a man pries his hand into his trousers pocket while sitting over a flat-topped desk.

Slowly the hand came to the top of the desk, and for a moment it lay beside a pile of galley proofs at Cooley's right. Then it picked up a pencil and joined its mate in the task of editing and turning over innumerable long sheets of copy.

The broken old man again leaned over and whispered a few words to Cooley, and again Cooley nodded. The scrawny old fingers paused for an instant where the city editor's hand had lain a few seconds before, and then the bent figure turned and tottered out of the room.

"Who's that?" asked Schooler.

"Cul Jenkins. Ever hear of him?"

"Cul Jenkins! Yes, but surely you don't mean Cul Jenkins, who used to be the—Cul Jenkins, who sent Barney Slattery to the penitentiary?"

"That's the man—Cul Jenkins, who sent Barney Slattery to the penitentiary, eighteen years ago this winter. It was the greatest piece of work ever done in this old town. It took Jenkins five years to get to the bottom of the traction graft, but when he got there he turned the place upside down!"

"Why," said Schooler, "I've heard old-timers all over the country talk about Cul Jenkins. The town gave him a house and lot and a trip around the world, somebody told me."

"Yep, and it all went the same way—booze and dope; but even now I can't refuse the old fellow a touch, when he looks as if he really needed a drink more than anything else on earth."

"And so he's the man who once sent Barney Slattery to the penitentiary," muttered Schooler, half to himself and half to Cooley.

"He's the man."

III

At half past ten Schooler started for the banquet, and the reporters began hurrying in with the stories they had been gathering during the evening. Henderson, who covered the State House, met the stranger at

the door. Being the star reporter, and in the confidence of the proprietor, he was free to joke with the city editor. He watched Schooler disappear, and then turned to Cooley.

"I see you've taken on another tramp," he observed, as he slipped off his overcoat, coat, and vest with one movement, and hauled his decrepit old chair over to his battered desk. "Where'd you pick him up?"

"Oh, he just dropped in," Cooley replied, "like the rest of them."

"It does beat the devil how we always get them! Nobody ever heard of one of 'em going over to the *Register* or the *Capitol*. I don't understand it!"

As a matter of fact, the explanation was simplicity itself. The men on the *Globe* had all been up against it themselves at various times, and ever after they radiated an unconscious sympathy which somehow formed itself into psychic currents that reached out and touched the itinerants as they scrambled off the blind baggage, and drew them up to the *Globe's* local room as the pole draws the needle.

One who knows little of the ways of reporters and printers will think that, if the *Globe* boys always gave, the unfortunates kept a record of them, put chalk marks on their curbstone, and all that sort of thing. Nothing in it! That would have been systematic, and no man who ever worked upstairs on a real newspaper was ever systematic. Any man in any department—especially the business office—will tell you that.

The only ambition of the *Globe* reporters was to dig up a cracking good story to-day and see it spread all over the first page to-morrow. That was as far as they lived in the future. They could scent a story from afar and run it to earth—and they did, not for hope of filthy lucre or fame, but for the pure, unadulterated love of the chase.

The future could take care of itself. They were good reporters. They could always get a job. They could do anything there was to be done on the editorial end of a newspaper. That was enough. Why think about destiny?

They were contented and happy, except when they railed against the rich; and they hated with a burning hatred the men on the other disgraceful, lying sheets misnamed newspapers. Oh, it's easy to un-

derstand what sort of a crowd they were! If you have any imagination at all, you will get that psychic current idea, and will appreciate why a tramp reporter who landed in Burlington at nine o'clock at night found his way into the *Globe* office at ten minutes past nine.

On the night of Schooler's arrival, the blustery winter weather outside enhanced the mellowness of the old local room. The floating layers of tobacco smoke, the walls plastered with all sorts of pictures and clippings, from likenesses of John L., Lillian Russell, Queen Victoria, and other notables, to ragged copies of "Casey at the Bat," Eugene Field's "Willie," and a few Spanish war headlines from the *New York Journal*, created an informal atmosphere of goodfellowship.

Amid these surroundings most of the crowd were lazily discussing the news of the day when Schooler again entered the room, a few minutes after one o'clock. The others had finished their work, and the old building vibrated with the thunder of three presses in the basement, rumbling forth the mail edition at the rate of sixteen thousand an hour apiece.

Schooler barely nodded to Cooley when the city editor said:

"Hurry it up—it's getting late."

He slowly removed his coat, deliberately rolled a cigarette, selected a long sheet of copy paper, sat down at the nearest desk, carefully placed the paper in the typewriter, leaned back in his chair, and gazed at the ceiling. Suddenly his face brightened. He sat forward with a jerk, and began to play rapidly upon the keys.

In the *Globe* office men still talk of Schooler's story of the "Happy Widower" dinner, which began with a frolic, raced gayly through ten courses, and ended in sudden murder, with a horrified company staring, wide-eyed, from the body of their famous manager to the white-faced, frenzied woman whose jealousy he had flouted once too often. The tale has been added to that long traditional list whose heading is "the best story the *Globe* ever printed," and it really deserves a place well forward in that category.

Cooley had asked for a human interest story. Schooler wrote a gripping chapter out of life—a vital, personal story, bubbling with mirth and laughter, thrilling with romance, chuckling with sardonic humor, and sobbing with tragedy. It trickled

up and down the whole scale of human emotion, from tears to laughter and back to tears—and it was written by a tramp reporter who hadn't a penny to his name or a couch on which to rest his tired body. Many times these strange things happen.

Cooley walked over to Schooler's desk and cut the first part of the story off the long sheet of paper which was winding steadily through the typewriter, whose rhythmic click had not halted since the reporter began to write. The city editor walked back to his desk and began to read it, holding his pencil in his right hand, suspended above the paper, but never once touching the manuscript before him.

When he had finished, he leaned back and looked at Schooler. Then he shook his head, picked up the copy, and went slowly downstairs to the composing room. The *Globe* boys could tell from his shining eyes, and from the fact that he had not changed a word in the copy, that Schooler was writing a great story.

When Cooley returned, Schooler stopped long enough to relight his cigarette, which had gone out unnoticed as he held it dangling from his lips.

"Stand any more?" he asked.

"All you can write," replied the city editor.

Schooler settled himself in his chair and again began to tap the keys, not as rapidly as some reporters pound a typewriter, but steadily, never hesitating for a word, a phrase, or a sentence. It was just a quarter to three when he stopped, pulled the last strip of paper out of the machine, and walked over and laid it on Cooley's desk. He stretched, drew his hand over his eyes, and then looked at the clock. The rest had been looking at it for half an hour, for the *Globe* went to press at three, and nothing but a great story could gain even the slightest consideration from Cooley so late in the night.

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Schooler. "I didn't know it was so late. What's your dead line?"

"Two o'clock, for routine stuff," Cooley answered; "but this is different."

The other reporters made friends with Schooler, timidly telling him their names, and holding him a little in awe, because he had written the story of the night. He was not as friendly as they were willing to be, and he declined their invitations to supper, to share a drink or a bed. Finally

they left him smoking a cigarette and studying the ceiling.

Down in the composing room Cooley was convincing the foreman that the last of Schooler's story could be set before closing time, and fighting the make-up man to keep him from sidetracking it to an inside page. When his troubles were finally over, he came back upstairs and found Schooler curled up on the exchange table, with a pile of old newspapers for a pillow and his old raincoat for a blanket.

"Damned good story!" muttered Cooley, glancing at the silent figure. "One of the best this old rag ever printed. I'll put him on regular to-morrow. We're getting big enough for a lot more human-interest stuff, and I'll keep him at it all the time. I suppose booze is the answer, but if he can keep up the lick he started to-night I'll be willing to stand for a good deal."

Cooley put on his coat, hat, and overcoat, and started for the door. He paused for an instant to look once more at the figure of the tramp reporter. He hesitated, fingered the dollar and the nickel in his pocket—the quarter having disappeared—and then shut the door quietly and went downstairs.

He trudged home through the storm, happy that fate had sent into his world, where good reporters were scarce, a man who could produce such a story as Schooler had written that night.

IV

It seemed to Cooley that he had been asleep only a few minutes when he was awakened by the ringing of his telephone, which stood on a table at the head of his bed. After several sleepy grabs he got the receiver off the hook and against his ear. The voice of the old janitor at the *Globe* came to him over the wire.

"This you, Mr. Cooley?" the man asked. "Listen—there's a dead man down here in the local room. I found him on the exchange table, covered up with a mackintosh, when I came in to clean up."

"I'll be right down," Cooley replied, now thoroughly awake.

With his brain in turmoil, he hurriedly dressed, dashed out of the house, and half ran and half walked the ten blocks to his office. He ran up the stairs two steps at a time, and met the janitor at the door of the local room.

A strong odor of gas filled the hall, and confirmed the fear that had been forming in his mind.

"The doors and windows were shut tight when I came up," said the janitor, "and every gas jet was open. He's stone dead."

Cooley stepped into the local room and stood silent beside the exchange table, with his eyes upon the thin, wasted figure lying there. Then he staggered to his desk and dropped into his chair. He stared at the big white blotter in front of him, and gradually became conscious that he was reading his own name. Still dazed, he picked

up the slip of copy paper upon which it was written, and read:

DEAR COOLEY:

I know it's rotten to break it on afternoon time, but a hundred years from now nobody will know the difference. The reason I'm doing it is that I had a glimpse into the future to-night—and it wasn't pleasant. I want to go now, while I'm doing good work, for fear that some day I may be another "man who sent Barney Slattery to the penitentiary."

Thanks for what you did for me, old fellow. I had a bully dinner at the theater before the big show happened, and it feels fine not to be hungry.

GEORGE FENNIMORE SCHOOLER.

"30"

On Different Planes

TOOTS, STAR OF A COMEDY FLYING ACT, ENCOUNTERS AN ARDENT YOUNG REFORMER AND HIS HIGHLY VIRTUOUS AUNT

By Vivien Chandler

THE clock struck nine, Steven Stillwell paused in his writing, yawned, and stretched his weary arms. It would be midnight before his lecture was completed, and he was tired.

For a moment he listened to the wind, as it tore through the branches of the pines, mingling its uproar with the steady drizzle of the rain. Within the cabin all was quiet, save for the fitful crackling of the log fire and the monotonous ticking of the clock. What a night for sleep! Steven gave a longing glance at his curtained bunk, sighed, and wearily picked up his pen.

Steven was the newly appointed secretary of the Society for the Promotion of Moral Welfare and Mental Hygiene. He was an earnest young man, and took himself and his responsibilities very seriously. To-morrow night, in the new Larson Library, he was to deliver a lecture on "Modern Menaces" to the Rotarians of Pottersville. He had been writing for two hours, but the forceful arguments and polished phrases for which he strove had failed to materialize.

A loud rap at the door caused him to scowl and gather up his scattered papers.

"Who is it?" he called, carrying the lamp to the door.

"It's Aunt Sophia!" called an angry voice. "Let me in!"

With an exasperated sigh Steven opened the door, to admit a stout, red-cheeked old lady in an old-fashioned dolman.

"Well, Steven Stillwell!" she scolded. "You're a fine nephew! I suppose you'd let me stand out in the rain all night!"

"Oh, Aunt Sophia, I beg your pardon! I was just completing a paragraph in my speech. I've had so many interruptions to-day!"

"Why? Who's been here?" inquired his aunt, with instant curiosity, her bright, birdlike eyes darting about the cabin.

"No one but you, Aunt Sophia."

"Well, I like that! I've only been here three times to-day. The first time I came to bring you your heavy underwear. The next time I came to tell you that I saw a case of bottles delivered at the Simpsons' back door. I just know they're going to make something! Have you phoned them yet, to ask about it?"

"No, I haven't," said Steven wearily, "but I will."

"And the third time," his aunt continued, "I simply had to come over and tell you about those brazen moving-picture actresses walking down Main Street in their bathing suits."

"I know, aunt. I realize that you mean well; but my only object in coming out to this cabin was to be alone. I must have solitude in order to write and think."

"Write and think! Bosh! I'll warrant you have some other reason for leaving my comfortable house to come out to this lonely cabin. Probably you want to give afternoon teas to those picture girls!"

"Far from it! In fact, the lecture you interrupted is directed against the picture people. I'm going to drive them out of town!"

"I hope you do!" said his aunt emphatically. "As I drove by Kellogg's drug store, there sat three of those hussies, drinking ice cream sodas as big as you please, and laughing fit to kill—and in one-piece bathing suits, mind you, no bigger'n penwipers! I'll feel a whole lot safer about you when they're gone. Never a day do I pick up the paper that I don't read some scandal about one of you reformers gone wrong."

"Nonsense!" returned Steven impatiently. "No woman but you has ever seen the inside of this cabin, or ever will. Would you mind telling me what brings you out on a five-mile drive in the rain at nine o'clock at night?"

"Well, I just got to worrying about your cold, and I couldn't sleep until I'd brought you a hot water bag, and some dry mustard for a foot bath."

Sundry mysterious parcels appeared from beneath the black dolman.

"But I don't need them!" protested Steven, backing away.

"Oh, Steven, you're so reckless! You have no regard for your health! And the hours you keep! I'll warrant you haven't been in bed one night before nine o'clock—now have you?"

"Perhaps I haven't, but I'm very tired to-night."

His aunt beamed.

"Well, then, I'll give you a nice dose of onion sirup, and leave you, if you'll promise to go straight to bed as soon as I go. For the land's sake! Where is that onion sirup? I made a quart of it to-day, and I don't see how I could have forgotten to bring it!"

"Don't you worry, aunt. I'll be all right."

"Well," she said anxiously, "I'll be over the first thing in the morning. I'm so sorry I forgot that onion sirup!"

Steven closed the door with a sigh of relief. The interview with his aunt had so exasperated him that he was in no mood for finishing his lecture. He decided to turn in.

Removing his coat, he hung it carefully on a hanger, then took off his shoes and inserted boot trees. Ridding himself of his shirt and collar, he proceeded methodically to do a series of bending exercises. He then placed a pillow on the floor, and, lying on his back, put his feet back over his head.

"Gee, look at little Jack Dempsey!" said a delighted voice from the doorway.

II

STEVEN's long legs clove the air, and his feet descended with a thud. Sitting up dizzily, he gazed dumfounded at the girl in the doorway.

She was a little thing, not five feet tall, with a startling shock of yellow ringlets. Not the least noticeable thing about her was the fact that she was clad in bright cerise tights. The upper part of her slender body was clothed—or, rather, unclothed—in a tightly fitting sleeveless doublet of some glittering silver material. A tiny rhinestone cap, with a jaunty if somewhat bedraggled feather, completed her outfit.

She stood there laughing at Steven, the raindrops glistening on her astounding doll-like curls, and shimmering in her heavily darkened eyelashes. His mouth fell open.

"Wh—who are you?" he finally managed to gasp.

The vision surveyed him with unnaturally brilliant mocking eyes.

"I'm Mrs. Pankhurst," she giggled. "I've come to get your views on the suffrage question."

Steven scrambled to his feet, hastily covering his chest with the pillow.

"I—I don't understand! Wh—what are you d—doing here?" he stammered.

The vision laughed airily.

"I was just taking a little stroll in the woods, and I saw your light, so I thought I'd drop in and have a couple of games of pinochle."

"Well, this is no place for you!" blustered Steven, beside himself with confusion.

and embarrassment. "Let me inform you, young lady, that I am the secretary of the Society for the Promotion of Moral Welfare and Mental Hygiene!"

"Percy, you surprise me! I thought you were an acrobat."

"Where did you come from?"

She burst out laughing.

"Gee, I guess I got you going all right! Excuse me for not sending my card in advance, but you see I came in an airplane."

"An airplane!"

"An airplane," she mimicked, "from over at Pottersville."

"But that's impossible! Won't you explain?"

"Well, Percy, it's a long, sad story. Mind if I sit down?"

"Not at all. Take this chair, won't you? Pardon this informality," he added, as he hastily put on his bathrobe and slippers.

"Mind if I smoke?" asked the girl, crossing her legs and taking a cigarette out of her jeweled cap.

"Oh, my goodness!" gasped Steven.

She daintily lighted her cigarette, took an avid preliminary puff, and began to talk.

"You see, the Radiant Film people are taking some pictures over here at Pottersville. Dad and I were playing a carnival near there, so we dashed over to try out our act for the movies. We do a comedy flying act, and it's a riot. We've been hanging around for a week, waiting for a chance to show our stuff, and to-day was the day. Well, dad had to pick this particular day to go and get soused, so I had to go it alone. I was pretty sore, you bet, waiting for him all that time. Then, after I had given him up, he comes tottering around the corner, and says, 'I was taken drunk,' just as if that excused everything; and everybody laughed. Well, I wanted to show off, so I went shooting up like hell and blazes. Get me?"

"I get you," said Steven. "I mean, I comprehend."

"Well, I went kind of dippy, I guess. I just wanted to get away from everything, and I thought I'd stay out till my temper cooled down. Pretty soon I forgot all about dad, and was having a swell time, doing stunts I'd never done before; but all of a sudden—I was only a couple of thousand feet up—I began to have engine trouble, and I'm a son of a gun if the plane

didn't begin to drop—very slowly, but it was dropping, just the same. I steered for all I was worth, but I could see I was heading for the river. Finally I saw what looked like a dandy big sand bar, and I made my landing on it, but the blooming thing acted just like quicksand—"

"It was quicksand!" said Steven excitedly. "I know that sand bar! Every one around here does."

"Then I guess the old plane's a goner. Well, for a few minutes I was busier 'n a kid with St. Vitus dance on roller skates; but a blessed stump sticking out of the water saved my life. It was raining pitchforks by then, so I took refuge in an old barn, and went to sleep. I just woke up a little while ago. Gee, dad 'll be throwing a fit!"

"Your poor father will be distracted," agreed Steven.

"Dad?" she laughed. "Say, I'll bet that poor old goof is hot-footing it around like a crazy cop in a one-reel film, looking for me!"

"Can't you call him up, and tell him to come and get you?" Steven suggested hopefully.

"Oh, I suppose so," she said carelessly. "There's no hurry. Give me time to get my breath, can't you?"

The hopeful gleam died in Steven's eyes. "Er—I was just thinking—" he began desperately.

"Don't you worry about me!" she laughed. "I'm having a grand time. Sit down and be sociable! Have a cigarette?"

"Oh, no!" said Steven. "I wouldn't think of it!"

"Nice little joint you've got here," said the girl, evidently trying to put him at his ease. "Are you married?"

"No," he answered uncomfortably. "I am alone here, and it is five miles to the nearest neighbors."

"Gee, that's nice!" she sighed happily. "Then I don't have to worry about dropping my cigarette ashes on your rugs."

Steven glanced furtively at the window. "The only woman who ever comes here is my aunt—a very estimable woman, but most particular."

"My aunt's just like that, too," she said sociably. "Ever hear of Birdie McClusky, the lion tamer? You can eat off the floor of any lion's cage Aunt Birdie owns. I'd like to have you meet her, Mr.—say, what's your name?"

"Stillwell," Steven replied stiffly.

"Last name, ain't it? What's the front one? Mine's Toots."

"Steven."

She gave a pleased giggle.

"Ain't that funny? I once had a pet alligator named Steve, so it 'll come quite natural. I ain't going to tell you my last name, so you'll have to call me Toots. It 'll make me feel more at home."

This last, to Steven, seemed entirely superfluous. He frowned.

"Really, you're making the situation very embarrassing, Miss—"

"Toots," she prompted.

"Miss Toots."

"Can that stuff!" she commanded. "Just Toots!"

"Well—er—er—Toots. This is a most distressing predicament, Miss—er—er—Toots. Really, I'm at a loss to know just what to do."

"Well, I know what *I'd* do, if I were in your place," she chuckled.

"What would you do?" asked Steven hopefully.

"I'd say, 'Little One, commuting between here and heaven, as you do, you must get awful hungry. What would you say to a ham sandwich and a bottle of home brew?'"

"Home brew!" shuddered Steven. "I never have liquor in my house. I signed the pledge when I was six years old."

Toots laughed delightedly.

"Oh, cheer up, Steve!" she said, noting his shocked expression. "You look just like Aunt Birdie!"

Steven surveyed her grimly. She jumped up and put one little hand coaxingly on his sleeve.

"Say," she whispered, "you never swore off on *food*, did you?"

Steven backed away as if the little hand had burned him.

"I d-don't know what there is to eat," he stammered. "You see, I'm living all alone here. I live very simply, and devote most of my time to writing. I'm on a diet, and I fear the larder will prove painfully inadequate."

"I *love* your monologue," interrupted Toots; "but can't you save it for the salad course? Honestly, I'm starving!"

"Maybe I could find some wafers and tea," Steven admitted hesitantly.

"Great!" she cried. "Let me help!"

Steven capitulated.

"All right; but hadn't you better call your father up first?"

"Say," she said, fixing him reproachfully with her great eyes, "the only sound I could make over a phone right now is a snarl of hunger. Wait till I'm fed!"

"Oh, very well," Steven resigned himself. "I'll prepare something at once. Do you like crackers?"

"Sure! I'm a regular cracker fiend; but haven't you any *food*?"

"Well, there are a few cans here," admitted Steven reluctantly, climbing on a chair to reach the shelf. "Here's some codfish."

"What's that one up there, with the red label?" asked Toots, steadying the chair.

"Why, let me see—that's a can of baking powder."

"No, stupid—that nice fat one!"

"That's shoe polish."

"Well, Steve, if you ain't a dumb-bell! Here!" Toots climbed nimbly to the back of his chair, and reached over his shoulder. "Beans! I knew it!" She jumped lightly down. "Now I'll stir up a nice batch of hot biscuits—"

"Oh, no!" protested Steven hastily. "They take so long!"

"Oh, you're hungry, too!" Toots beamed sympathetically. "Well, we won't wait, then."

"We could have some tea, I suppose," ventured Steven, beginning to melt in spite of himself.

"All right!" said Toots agreeably. "Get me an apron, and I'll fix it."

"I have no apron," he apologized, producing a green bath robe. "Would you mind putting this on?"

"Hold it for me, please," requested Toots.

A dull flush suffused his sallow face, but, hastily averting his eyes from her bare dimpled shoulders, he helped her into the bath robe.

"Gee, I could put on a swell art dance in this!" she giggled. "'Spirit of Winter'—see?" With a wide fling of the voluminous bath robe, she did some truly amazing kicks. "Don't look so scared, Steve!" she laughed breathlessly. "I wouldn't harm a bone in your head!"

She tucked up the sleeves of the bath robe with a businesslike air, and handed him the teakettle.

"Do you like lemon in your tea?" he inquired politely.

"I don't know. I never tried it. Say, where's the can opener?"

"Let me do that," he said, rescuing the can from her murderous assaults.

"Say, don't we make a happy little family?"

Steven blushed furiously.

"You do say the most amazing things!"

"Sure!" she agreed. "I'm a regular cut-up. You'll be crazy about me when you get used to me."

"I beg your pardon?" said Steven, looking at her oddly. "Oh, don't read that!"

In clearing the table, Toots had discovered his manuscript on "Modern Menaces."

"The moving-picture actresses must go!" she read slowly.

"That's my speech! Oh, you mustn't read that!"

Ignoring him, she read on:

"The moving pictures are a menace. Our little village is flooded with loose characters of both sexes, who, by their shocking attire and patent immorality—"

She threw down the paper.

"Well, of all the nerve! I don't know what you mean by 'patent immorality,' but *we* didn't patent it, anyway! What do *you* know about the pictures? Were you ever in pictures?"

"Why, no, of course not," declared Steven with dignity. "I don't approve of them."

"Ever know anybody in pictures?"

"No, but my judgment tells me—"

"Your judgment!" she jeered. "How can you judge a thing by sitting home and writing about it? Why don't you get out and see what it's really like?"

"My position forbids my knowing such people," said Steven haughtily. "As secretary of the Society for the Promotion of Moral Welfare and Mental Hygiene, you could hardly expect me to approve of motion pictures."

"And you call that fair!" she flamed.

"Why, I thought reformers were good, and that their business was helping people to be better. Am I right?"

"Yes, that's what we try to do."

"Have you a religion?"

"Why, of course, child, and I try to live up to it."

"Well, I don't claim to know a thing about religion. None of my family were religious. Of course, dad's got converted now and then, when he had a bun on, and

two or three times he's joined the Salvation Army; but he always backslid when he sobered up, so I don't really count him."

Steven shuddered.

"I never knew but one person who had what I'd call real religion," Toots went on. "He was a little old Irish priest. He wasn't like you, Steve! He didn't sit home writing a lot of old maid bunk about 'patent immorality.' Not much! He didn't write anything—he had too much sense; but he mixed with all kinds of people, and the bad ones loved him as much as the good ones. If any one was sick or in trouble, he was right on the job. He could tell a funny story, and he *loved* a joke. If I ever get religion, I hope I get his kind, not yours!"

Tears of rage stood in her flashing eyes.

"I'm sorry, Toots," said Steven contritely. "I wouldn't have hurt your feelings for the world. Won't you have your tea now? Everything is ready."

"Wheel!" squealed Toots, with a lightning change to good humor. "What I'm going to do to this free lunch!" Ravenously she bit into a sandwich. "Aunt Birdie's lions have nothing on me for appetite! What you waiting for? Oh!" She blushed. "I forgot! Go ahead and say it, please!"

Steven bent his head and murmured a short grace.

"And," he concluded, "dear Father, who knowest all our hearts, teach us Thine own humility, and help us to be more worthy of Thy loving kindness. Amen!"

Toots leaned across, and patted his hand.

"I was mean to you, Steve," she said apologetically. "You're all right, I'm sure, only you've got a lot to learn. There's people right with that second-rate film company that the Angel Gabriel could tip his halo to."

"Perhaps you're right," said Steven musingly. "I suppose I have lived rather a narrow, selfish life. I have been more concerned with doctrines than with deeds. Now that I come to think of it, I really can't recall that I ever sacrificed myself for any one."

"When you're wise to yourself, you're on the right track," observed Toots reassuringly. "You just don't *understand*. Your bread and butter's always been wheeled up to you on a tea cart, so you can sit back and watch other people hustle, and say, 'Mercy! How can those rough per-

sons make their living in such a vulgar manner?"

Steven flushed uncomfortably.

"Oh, it's not quite so bad as that!" he protested.

"Yes, that's just the way you feel. I know you do!" Toots's mop of curls bobbed defiantly. "You've never been up against it. I suppose you think I'm pretty flip, talking to you like this, but I've knocked around a lot, and run up against all kinds of people, and some of the worst of them have been the best to me."

"How did you ever happen to choose such a hazardous profession?" asked Steven, interested.

"Choose it?" she laughed. "It chose me. My father was a circus clown. Didn't you ever hear of Cap O'Rell, the Whistling Clown? Well, he's my dad. He was one of the best in his day. My mother was Maizie McClusky, the bareback rider, but she ran away with a ringmaster. Poor old dad's been drunk ever since, more or less, and I just naturally became his little old meal ticket."

"Are you well paid for such work?"

"Yes, we've been making good money with the new act, but to-day has finished us, for we haven't saved anything this season. That comedy airplane set us back sixteen hundred berries, and dad built it himself, at that. Now it's probably in China. Gee, I don't know how I'll ever face him!"

Her eyes filled with tears.

"I'm sorry—very sorry," said Steven, surprised at his own emotion.

Toots dashed away her tears, leaving a smudge of mascara on one pink cheek.

"Oh, we'll come out all right," she said bravely. "We've had tough luck before, and pulled through it. I can always flit back to the merry old trapeze. I did that for three years."

"But, Toots," said Steven earnestly, "why not follow some less dangerous profession? Couldn't you be a stenographer?"

Toots threw back her pretty head and laughed.

"Believe me, Steve, a stenographer takes more chances than a trapeze performer every day. Not for mine!"

Steven fingered his napkin nervously.

"Would you be offended if I offered you the money for a new airplane? It would give me such pleasure to help you!"

Toots's laughter vanished.

"You're quite a kiddier, after all, Steve," she said coldly.

"But I'm quite serious," he protested. "I can easily afford it."

Toots eyed him for a moment. Then she impulsively put both hands in his.

"Steve, you're a good scout, and it's great of you to offer it. I couldn't let you give me the money, but, if you'll trust me, I'll let you lend it to me. I'll pay back every cent of it, or my name isn't Toots O'Rell!"

Steven produced his check book.

"I'll write it right now. Er— It's getting very late. Hadn't you better telephone your father?"

"Gee, I forgot it!" said Toots, stepping on a book to reach the telephone. "One, five, two, please. Is this Cassidy's saloon?"

Steven looked up, horrified.

"Is Cap O'Rell there in the back room? Tell him Toots wants him. Hello, dad! Had you given me up? Sure! I'm over here in a cabin, with a reformer. No, not a roughneck—a reformer! Sure! I got him eating out of my hand!" She winked drolly at Steven. "Can't you come over and get me? Why? What you doing? Dollar limit? Hurrah for you! It's the first time you've won a nickel in sixteen years! You stick right there till they throw you out! No—I'll be all right. We're having a swell time. I'll call you up in the morning. By!"

Steven listened with growing horror.

"Surely you don't mean to stay here? It's impossible! Call your father again!"

"Don't you worry about me," said Toots, picking up a cushion. "I can bunk here on the floor. Got an extra blanket?"

Steven rushed forward and snatched the pillow from her.

"Don't you understand?" he gasped. "It's improper! It's compromising!"

"Keep your camisole on, Steve!" she smiled teasingly. "You're just as safe with me as you would be in a cage full of rattlesnakes. Now listen! Be a sport! Just pretend we're shipwrecked on a desert island. If we were, you wouldn't be pulling this Beatrice Fairfax stuff. You'd be a good scout and make the best of it."

"My dear child," said Steven firmly, "it is simply out of the question!"

"Farewell, then, Marmaduke Montmorency!" she replied tragically, going to the door. "You have hounded me from your home! When a pallid corpse in pink tights

is found on your doorstep, you'll regret this cruelty!"

"Stop!" shouted Steven, grasping her wrist. "You can't go like that! I won't let you!"

III

SUDDENLY there came a loud knock at the door. Both stood petrified.

"In there—quick!" whispered Steven hoarsely, motioning toward the curtained bunk.

"Open the door, Steven! It's Aunt Sophia!" called a voice outside.

With a panic-stricken glance toward the bunk, he admitted his unwelcome guest.

"Well, what do you think?" tittered Aunt Sophia. "I drove about halfway home, and then I happened to think. I looked under the seat, and there was the onion sirup! Wasn't that lucky?"

"It's awfully nice of you, Aunt Sophia, but—but—I think you'd better go right back."

"No, I want you to make me a cup of tea before I go. Why, the tea's all made! How nice!"

She pulled back a chair.

"No! Over here!" cried Steven, seating her with her back to the curtained bunk.

"Steven, who has been here?" she asked suspiciously.

"Nobody."

"But there are two cups out!"

"Oh, yes, I remember," said Steven absently. "There was some one here."

"Who was it?"

"Er—a—a—little boy," gulped Steven. "A little boy dropped in."

Toots stuck her head out between the curtains and grinned at him maliciously.

"What little boy?" snapped his aunt.

"Why—er—the little Holden boy."

"Willie Holden?" Aunt Sophia's tone was incredulous. "Why, he has been quarantined for three weeks with scarlet fever!"

"Well, I certainly thought that was Willie," murmured Steven weakly.

"You surely didn't allow a child to smoke in your presence?" exclaimed Aunt Sophia, picking up a half burned cigarette from her saucer.

"Oh, that isn't a cigarette," lied Steven briskly. "It's cubebs."

"Guess I'll smoke it, then. It might help my cold," said his aunt, lighting a match.

"Oh, no!" cried Steven hysterically.

"Stop fidgeting, Steven! You make me nervous!"

"Hurry up and drink your tea, auntie. You've got quite a drive, you know. I don't like to think of you out alone so late at night."

"Fiddlesticks! There's no danger."

"That's where you're wrong," he said earnestly. "The woods are full of tramps."

"What makes you think so?"

"I've noticed them about—dozens of them."

"Don't be absurd, Steven! What's this blue thing?" she asked, pouncing on the check. "'Pay to Toots O'Rell two thousand dollars'—who on earth is Toots O'Rell?"

"Why," lied Steven miserably, "Miss O'Rell is an old lady that I met once, years ago. She lives in Boston."

"But why are you giving her two thousand dollars?"

"Well, she's collecting—er—she's sort of collecting—"

"So I notice," said his aunt cuttingly; "but what's she collecting *for*?"

"Why, for the Soldiers' Home."

"Steven Stillwell, what possible interest can you have in the Soldiers' Home?"

"My father was—"

"No, he wasn't!" snapped Aunt Sophia.

"I was *going* to say," resumed Steven with dignity, "that my father was once acquainted with a soldier whom he greatly admired."

"Your father was an idiot, and you're another!" remarked his aunt frankly.

Steven rose.

"Aunt Sophia, we are both tired and nervous. Let us postpone this discussion till another time."

"Very well," she said crossly; "but don't think you're going to get out of it. You've been acting very peculiarly." She paused on the threshold. "Listen! Wasn't that thunder?"

"No, I didn't hear it."

"I distinctly heard thunder. I don't believe I'd better risk it."

"How ridiculous! The stars are shining brightly!"

"It's going to rain again—I can feel it in my bunion. Anyhow, you've got me kind of nervous about those tramps. I'll stay here to-night."

Steven turned pale.

"I was only joking about those tramps, auntie. There's not the slightest danger."

"Steven Stillwell, would you turn your poor old aunt out into the heart of a storm, with a cutthroat waiting behind every tree?"

"But really, aunt, you must go!" protested Steven desperately. "I can't keep you here!"

"Stuff and nonsense! Of course I'll stay!" announced his aunt, taking off her wraps. "I'll sleep in this chair, and you can go right to bed."

"But I'm not sleepy!" wailed Steven.

"All right—you stay up, and I'll go to bed," said Aunt Sophia briskly, making for the bunk.

IV

STEVEN made a frantic leap, but too late. One jerk of the curtain, and Toots sat revealed, doubled up with helpless laughter.

"Peekaboo!" she gasped.

"Merciful Heavens!" screamed Aunt Sophia.

Toots stepped out, not in the least embarrassed.

"I had a hunch Steve wasn't going to get away with that tramp stuff," she giggled. "You're too smart for him!"

"You disreputable creature! What are you doing here?"

"Just loafing," said Toots amiably. "What are *you* doing here?"

"You—you shameless—" began Aunt Sophia, but Steven interrupted her.

"Wait!" he said. "You don't understand! Toots—I mean this young lady—came in an airplane."

"A what?"

"An airplane."

"Steven Stillwell, do you think I'm crazy?"

"But it was a broken airplane. It dropped—"

"Right into your bed, I presume! What a good aim!"

"No, no—she walked in at the door."

"Well, well! How interesting!" jeered his aunt. "I suppose she dropped down in your bath robe, too?"

"Steve, you're making a show of yourself!" put in Toots. "Can't you see that your aunt thinks there's something shady here? Let me talk! I'll tell her where she gets off!"

"Young woman, hold your tongue! I'll do the talking!" shouted Aunt Sophia.

"Not much you won't!" Toots looked like an angry bisque doll. "You've been

talking all your life. This time you're going to listen. It was this bath robe gave you those bedroom farce ideas. I put it on to protect my working clothes. Look here!"

She flung off the bath robe. Aunt Sophia gave one horrified glance at the cerise tights, and turned the same color.

"Good Lord!" she gasped.

Toots surveyed her belligerently.

"Would you expect a girl to do a nose dive in a tailored suit?" she inquired.

Aunt Sophia recovered her breath.

"Steven, order this person out of the house this instant! I've read in the papers about the scandalous things you reformers do on the quiet, and I've always suspected you, but I never caught you before!" She turned on Toots. "As for you, I know who you are. You're Toots O'Rell, and you've been blackmailing this poor helpless, weak-minded boy. This check is made out to you!"

"Why, yes," said Toots blandly, tucking the check in her girdle. "That is mine. Thanks!"

"You see, she admits it, Steven!" cried Aunt Sophia triumphantly. "You might as well confess!"

"Aunt Sophia, you have made a terrible mistake. Miss O'Rell is a pure, sweet, innocent girl."

"Humph! She looks it!" sniffed his aunt.

"Toots," said Steven, "I can't tell you how sorry I am that you should have been subjected to this. I realize that I have compromised you, and I want to make amends. Toots, will you marry me?"

"Surest thing you know, Steve!" replied Toots, dimpling. "This is great luck for me! People have always told me I was cut out for a reformer's wife. Can we get married to-night?"

"Steven, you're crazy!" stormed his aunt. "This can't go any further! Young woman, how much do you want to get out of this town and never show your wicked face here again?"

Toots considered.

"Well," she said finally, "it ought to be worth a lot. If you had a face like mine, you'd want to show it, too."

Aunt Sophia glared. Then she controlled herself.

"I'll give you a check for two thousand dollars," she said crisply, "if you'll agree never to—"

"Quit your kidding!" laughed Toots. "Two thousand dollars? Say, I wouldn't give up a *relative* for that, much less Steve! Why, he and I are dippy about each other! You can see it!"

She favored Steven with a languishing glance.

"Three thousand, then. It's the best I'll do."

"Make it five," said Toots, "and I'll promise not even to send him a postal card."

"He's not worth that much!" snapped his aunt indignantly.

"Perhaps you're right," Toots admitted; "but think—it may be my last chance to marry a famous reformer."

"All right—five thousand; but you must agree to go away to-night."

"O. K., auntie, but you're losing a mighty talented niece," said Toots, as she took the old lady's check.

Steven stood there without a word, apparently in a trance. Events had progressed too rapidly for his slow and orderly mind to comprehend. Toots walked over to him, put her hands on his shoulders, and, standing on tiptoe, kissed him squarely on the mouth.

"Good-by, Steve," she said. "You're the grandest scout in the world, and I'll never forget you—or the debt, either. If you ever need that money in a hurry, you can always write me, in care of the *Bill-board*. And, Steve—I'd just love to marry you, and I *would*, only I'm afraid my husband might not like it."

"Your husband?" shrieked Aunt Sophia, horrified.

"Sure! I have a swell husband—Monty Malloy, the King of the High Wire. You must have heard of him. He's a wonder!"

"But I don't understand—" faltered the bewildered old lady.

"No, and you'll never understand!" said the girl bitterly. "I suppose you call yourself a good woman, but you're not. You're an old snoop—that's what you are! You're ready to think evil of people the first chance you get. You pretend to love Steve, and yet you don't believe in him a bit. You've known him all his life, and I've only known him an hour, and yet I'd trust him from here to hell-and-gone. Steve's the real thing. You're just a false alarm. As for this melodrama check you slipped me, I was only kidding. Here, take it! I'd rather sell red-hots on the corner than touch a penny of it. All I want of *you* is the loan of your flivver back to town, and this Paris model you made your entrance in. I'll send them back right away."

Calmly she appropriated Aunt Sophia's rusty black dolman, and flung it around her slender shoulders. A garish little figure, she paused in the doorway.

"My parting advice to you, auntie, is not to smoke so many cigarettes. I can see they're getting you!"

With an impish chuckle she was gone. The whirl of the departing flivver was heard outside.

"What a woman!" gasped Aunt Sophia, from the depths of her horrified soul.

Steven smiled a beatific and reminiscent smile.

"Yes!" he said dreamily. "What a woman!"

BECAUSE YOU LOVE ME

BECAUSE you love me, dear, and trust,
The soul within the trembling dust
Of me to worthiness aspires
And warms in new impetuous fires;
So I shall crush my doubt and fear,
And grow—because you love me, dear!

Because you love me, dear, the spark
That dimmed and dulled when all was dark
Shall glow again in conquering flame
That, wreathing, writes your golden name
Across the scroll of faith and cheer
I gain—because you love me, dear!

Olin Lyman

The Main Highway

THE STORY OF SOL FINK, THEATRICAL MANAGER, AND PATSY KERRIGAN, THE GIRL WHOM HE MADE A FAMOUS STAR

By Frank R. Adams

SOL FINK, manager of the stock company at the Flavia Theater, Jonesburg, Pennsylvania, sent for his publicity man much as *King Cole* must have summoned his Paul Whiteman.

"Bobby," he said to the young man who limped into his office, "probably you ain't a very good play writer—probably you ain't a play writer at all—but I don't think a regular writer would do what I want him to, anyway. He would think I was crazy."

Robert Dalton cut to the meat of the idea at once.

"Are you going to produce an original with your stock company, and are you going to use one of my scripts?"

His eyes burned more than they ever had—and they always reminded one of holes in snow-covered ice.

"No," replied Fink. "No—I ain't going to produce one of your scripts with my stock company. I'm going to make a New York production with regular actors, and it's going to be a brand-new play written to order by somebody—maybe you—to fit a certain star that ain't a star yet."

"Who?"

"Patsy Kerrigan."

"But, Sol, that kid hasn't had any experience. We got her off the street. She just walked on in a tiny part in 'Secret Service' last week, and that was the first time she had ever been on the stage."

"Some people, Bobby, is born trained for certain jobs. I got a hunch about this girl, and I'm going to play it for all it's worth. If you don't want to—"

"But I do, Sol! I was just trying to save you money. If you're sold on the idea, nothing I can say will change you. I'm your huckleberry. What kind of a play do you want?"

"It ain't any particular kind of a play I want, Bobby; but there's got to be one scene in it where the fellow goes away from her and they both know he ain't never coming back. I want her to say 'Good-by' to him like Ethel Barrymore did to Bruce MacRae in a show by the name of 'Sunday,' that she used to play about the time your first teething ring had to be retreaded. 'Dan,' I want her to say, 'when you are very old, and death is standing at your bedside, if you feel a fluttering at your heart, it will only be my weary fingers come to rest at last. The warm tears on your cheek will be my tears, and the soft voice in your ear will be my voice whispering once more the words you have taught me to say—'Beloved, oh, my beloved!'"

"Here, wait a minute!" Bobby commanded. "Is that a speech out of Ethel Barrymore's play?"

"No—I just made that up to give you a sort of general idea of what—"

"Well, for the love of Pete, then shut up till I write it down!" Bobby devoted a minute to a pencil and a notebook. "Can I have that speech to put in the play?"

"Is it any good?"

"If Patsy can say it the way you're thinking it, it'll get sobs out of a cast-iron dummy! When do we begin to rehearse?"

II

EVERYBODY in the play was well known except the leading woman. For her own sake Sol Fink had not featured Patsy Kerrigan. He called it an all star cast, hired people who knew every trick in the business, and engaged a director who would have been able to handle Bernhardt and Duse in the same production. If ever a girl had a chance, it was Patsy Kerrigan, newly rechristened Alois Adair.

According to all traditions the venture should have been an awful flop. The critics should have laughed Alois off the stage for her presumption, and the public should have indifferently stayed away; but the unexpected happened. Everybody, even the hard-boiled destroying demons of the press, broke their hearts over the climax of "The Main Highway." During the second week of the run Patsy's new name was translated into electric lights over the theater entrance, not to be taken down again for two solid years, and then only because the entire company, bag and baggage, moved on to London.

After the opening night Sol Fink and Bobby Dalton, in unaccustomed evening clothes, sat in the office of the theater, slightly dazed by the size of the snowball they had set in motion.

"You'll make a fortune out of it, Sol," Bobby declared wistfully.

Sol grinned at him.

"I don't care about a fortune—no more than you do. Didn't you find out yet why I let you write this play for Patsy?"

"No. Why did you?"

"Because you love her, and you ain't got a chance in the world of ever getting her. You didn't write 'The Main Highway' with ink. It was the blood out of your heart, Bobby, and you never can do such a thing again."

Bobby wondered silently. This was a funny little Jew, a man who understood things that Bobby had never admitted to himself.

He laughed.

"If that's the case, how about the good-by speech that I took down word for word from your own lips?"

Sol shook his head.

"I ain't never denied it, Bobby, and I'm twice as hopeless as you are!"

The curious thing about it was that Patsy, of her own initiative, was not a particularly good actress. She was just a sensitive feminine instrument upon which men could play the melodies of emotion. Sol Fink, in some instinctive way, had recognized it first. Bobby Dalton had found it out when he began to write with her in mind. Jerry Strong had thrilled to the warmth of her response the minute he walked on the stage as her leading man.

Jerry had been Sol's choice for the character of *Don Stewart* as soon as he read the

script, and he had delayed the opening of "The Main Highway" until Jerry could complete another contract.

Jerry Strong was everything that Sol was not—everything that every wistful, unprepossessing-looking little man in the world wishes to be. He was tall and solid, not very handsome, but good-humored in a masterful way. He smoked cigars naturally and calmly in an age that whiffs at hectic cigarettes. All men liked him, and so did some women—the right ones. Jerry was English, and had lived thirty-five years, the last ten of them on the American stage.

No one would ever have known it to see them together, but Jerry was the materialization of Sol's bodily cramped spirit. Jerry and Sol liked each other, and Patsy Kerrigan gave her *blasé* child heart to Jerry right away.

Patsy had known men before, but never splendid ones. In general she was tremendously sophisticated for a girl barely twenty years old, but she had had no experience of people who thought smiling thoughts and asked nothing in return for being kind to her. It is true that she might have fallen in love with Sol, but nobody ever did, and he had not expected it. She might also have returned Bobby Dalton's curiously qualified admiration, but she was a little afraid of him. He was the intellectual type, and she felt conscious of her educational deficiencies in his presence; and Bobby didn't know how to tell her that it didn't matter.

But Jerry was different. Jerry had education, culture, everything, but, strangely enough, he had something else, too. He might have been quite as successful as a plumber or as a logging boss. He was just a superlative human being. Everybody could understand him. He picked you up and carried you away on the deep, running stream of his mellow, powerful voice. When he spoke, it meant something. It was probably his voice that had turned him accidentally into the theatrical profession.

Yes, Patsy gave her heart to him to keep; but she found out—in time—that he was married. She found it out, that is, before she told him her secret with anything but her eyes, and with the one kiss that she gave him every night and every matinée during the run of "The Main Highway"—the kiss that was written into her part just after the farewell speech.

It was ironical, wasn't it, to say farewell forever eight times a week, to have to tear her heart out day after day with the very words of renunciation that phrased the death knell of her own happiness? It was ironical, but it made an actress of Patsy. People didn't know that she was really on the verge of tears when she said:

"Dan, when you are very old, and death is standing at your bedside, if you feel a fluttering at your heart, it will only be my weary fingers come to rest at last. The warm tears on your cheek will be my tears, and the soft voice in your ear will be my voice whispering once more the words you have taught me to say—'Beloved, oh, my beloved!'"

Nobody knew that she really meant it—except possibly Sol Fink. Sol, as has been intimated, was possessed of a racial keenness of intuition which was rather more than feminine.

III

WHILE "The Main Highway" was in London, the war broke out. Jerry Strong was a British subject, and had been an officer in the Guards at an earlier period in his life; so naturally he went back into the army at once. Another actor—an American—took over the part. Sol Fink was afraid that Patsy would not be able to put the heartbreak into that farewell scene with any one else playing opposite to her, but she surprised him by being better than ever, if anything.

Bobby Dalton watched her through a performance, too, and came away wondering at what he had seen.

"Maybe she is a real actress after all," he told Sol.

Sol grinned wryly.

"Humph! Watch that scene from the wings some night."

"What do you mean?"

"You watch, and see what you think."

Bobby did, and later sought out the manager.

"Well?"

"She says the whole speech with her eyes shut."

"Yes."

"What do you make of that?" Bobby demanded.

"It ain't acting, Bobby—it's wireless telegraphy."

Even the longest runs and the most wearying wars must end sooner or later,

and the London engagement of "The Main Highway" finished before the armistice was signed. Sol Fink brought the company home for the much heralded New York *première* of a new play by the distinguished author of "The Main Highway," Mr. Robert Dalton.

Patsy and her fellow players were made much of on their arrival. Miss Adair was no longer a humble hoyden. The association with English stage traditions had sandpapered her down to a fineness that was only separated from nobility by a hairbreadth. She seemed, in fact, to be a lady first and an actress afterward.

The new play, "Dust of Dreams," opened at Stamford, Connecticut; and after the second act Bobby Dalton was trying to run away from the theater. Sol Fink, restlessly pacing the lobby, caught him in mid flight.

"Wait, Bobby! There ain't any use going out to drown yourself. Maybe it ain't all your fault."

The playwright made a boyish gesture of despair.

"It must be my fault, Sol," he declared. "You've mounted the piece as if it were a hitherto unproduced comedy by Richard Brinsley Sheridan, and you've given it the most wonderful cast that ever was, including Patsy."

"Yeh, but I didn't give you Jerry Strong to play the lead opposite to her, did I? Hadn't you noticed that there ain't any life in Patsy's performance? She don't care whether this leading man loves her or not, and he's so damned handsome that every woman in the audience hates her for resisting him."

Which was probably as nearly correct an explanation as any one could have given. To quote one of the Stamford critics:

Alois Adair gave a practically flawless but lifeless performance. She is lovely, graceful, wistful, but she doesn't seem to be the character. She doesn't care. The play might just as well have been a recitation of the multiplication table, as far as she was concerned.

IV

SOL canceled the New York opening.

"It's better, Bobby, for all of us that we shouldn't come in with a sure-fire flop." They were sitting in Sol's office in the city. "We'll put 'Dust of Dreams' in the storehouse for a bit, and maybe revive it later, if we find some woman to play the part.

If you need money, I'll write you a check for an advance royalty on a new play."

Bobby brushed the offer aside.

"I don't need money. You've given me half a million already. I was thinking about Patsy Kerrigan. What the deuce will she do?"

"Oh, that's all settled!"

Bobby looked at his chief with unconcealed misgiving.

"Yes?"

"She's going to marry me."

"She doesn't love you, Sol," protested Bobby.

"I know it, but I love her—perhaps even more than you do—and I'll take good care of her."

The two friends were silent for a minute. Then the Jew continued:

"I know she doesn't love me, but she needs somebody, because she's reached a place where she doesn't seem to care about anything."

Bobby called to offer his good wishes. Patsy was a lovely, gracile thing, as much a creature of spirit, now, as she had once been a frolicking animal in a human body.

"You do not approve, Bobby," she said listlessly, in that vibrant, mellow voice which was the feminine echo of Jerry Strong's. "Why not?"

"Marriage is a sacred thing. Your hand should go where your heart is, and nowhere else."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Perhaps! The marriage is Sol's idea. I offered to come to him without any ceremony, but he insists upon it."

"Offered to come to him without—"

"Why not, Bobby? Everything that I am I owe to him. You know how fine a man he really is. He would give his right hand for me. Can anything that I can do to please him be more than a little? Besides, I can't act any more. You'll admit that. Your play was charming, and everything about the production was wonderful except the star. I know it. Sol offers me a haven, and I shall take it."

"But surely other men have—"

"No other man whom I love, and there is no other to whom I owe so much, none whose love I value more highly; so that is settled." She sighed, not unhappily, and rose from the divan on which she had been reclining. "No more of that. Take me somewhere for lunch, Bobby, and tell me

what you are going to send me for a wedding present."

V

PATSY's acting career was not quite over, even according to Sol Fink's schedule. For her farewell to the stage he planned a revival of "The Main Highway," to play for only a few weeks in each of the principal American cities, which, owing to the New York and London runs of the piece, had never seen the creator of the most famous woman's part in recent histrionic history. It would take perhaps half a season to tour the route he had laid out.

Rehearsals began behind closed doors. Patsy did not really need to attend, because she knew the part better than she knew her alphabet, and anybody could have walked through it in her place; but she haunted the theater and said the lines over and over, much as a housewife lays caressing fingers on a house and furniture that she is leaving forever. She didn't really rehearse—she always played the part, even on a dim stage, just as if there were an audience hanging upon her every word.

As in the old days during the war, she often spoke with her eyes shut. It was then that she was at her best, that her voice took on the tones of a despairing cello.

Her husband-to-be did not often attend rehearsals. He said he was too busy, but in reality it was because the fringes of his understanding had become so sensitive that he could not stand the spectacle of the woman he worshiped saying good-by to love.

So while the play was plodding its relentless way to the climax downstairs on the rehearsal stage, the little manager frequently sat in his office above, a forgotten cigar in his mouth, his hands idle on his knees, wondering if he were making an irremediable mistake.

One day, as he sat thus, a strange man came into the office—a man who looked strange, that is, but the heart and hand of Sol Fink leaped out to him instantly. As has been said before, these two men were great friends.

"You'll have to give me your left hand, Sol. This right hand of mine was made in a factory. That's not the point, however. I came to you right off the boat to ask you a question. Do you know where I can locate Miss Adair—Patsy?"

"Why?" Sol countered defensively, knowing full well that only a partition wall and a flight of stairs separated them from the woman they both loved.

"Because I want to find out whether she is married, and whether she still means something I dreamed she almost said."

Sol considered thoughtfully.

"No, Jerry, she ain't married yet; but you are."

"Not any more. Mrs. Strong got a divorce when I was in the hospital so long. She didn't think I'd ever be up and about again. Neither did anybody else; but I made it somehow. One of the things that made me live was curiosity, I think; and here I am."

Sol lit his dead cigar and got up.

"Come with me."

A single strip light, lowered from the flies, provided the prosaic illumination for the voice-worn dialogue of the third act. Moonlight and heartbreak sifted through the words, but unshielded tungstens and kitchen chairs were the actual physical concomitants of the romance that has dampened more handkerchiefs than any single laundry in the world could ever wash and iron.

A woman moved about among the wooden chairs and the more or less wooden actors, creating an atmosphere of tapestries and velvets—a woman whose voice painted golden echoes in the dingy recesses of the theater.

The little manager, who had entered the dark auditorium, turned around to see why the other man had not followed. Jerry Strong stood quite still at the door.

"I had almost forgotten her voice," he explained in a whisper. "It makes one believe in magic!"

"We'll go back on the stage," Sol suggested, and led the way.

There was silence back there. The waiting actors seldom chatted during that scene. It held them, even though they had heard it dozens of times.

Patsy had already begun:

"Dan, when you are very old, and death is standing at your bedside, if you feel a fluttering at your heart, it will only be my weary fingers come to rest at last."

"Come on!" said Sol, while she was speaking, and dragged Jerry out on the stage.

"Hush!" Jerry returned in a whisper. "Don't interrupt her!"

"I'm not going to."

They stood before Patsy. Her eyes were closed, and she was rocking her soul to the music of the words. Everything was shut out from her senses but a memory picture of the man to whom she prayed.

Sol touched the actor who was playing opposite to her, and motioned him away. Then he slipped into the shadows himself, leaving Patsy and Jerry alone on the stage.

She knew that something had happened, but she must have believed that it was on another plane of existence, for she did not open her eyes. Her voice became more vibrant, however, and a little huskiness came into it, as if her heart had suddenly risen to her throat.

"The warm tears on your cheek will be my tears, and the soft voice in your ear will be my voice whispering once more the words you have taught me to say—"

She faltered, but Jerry took up the speech—"Beloved, oh, my beloved!"—and he said it as the line had never been spoken before.

Sol Fink went out through the stage door, although the nearest way to his office was through the auditorium.

VI

PATSY came up to see him alone after the rehearsal. Her eyes were frankly wrecked with mixed emotions, and her voice was untrustworthy.

"Why did you let him find me, Sol?" she demanded piteously. "You knew it would tear me all up!"

Sol regarded her dispassionately.

"Patsy, ain't I taught you yet that in our profession business comes before pleasure every time? Do you think I'm going to let the best leading man on the stage get away from me just because my star don't want to work opposite him? You got to use some sense, Patsy! With Jerry back in his old part we can run this piece for two or three or maybe five years more all over the country."

"But," Patsy objected, "you and I were to be married!"

"Not until the end of the run of 'The Main Highway,'" Sol reminded her. "By that time we'll have an extra million dollars in our pockets to spend on our honeymoon

if we still want to take one. What's matrimony compared to a million dollars? Anybody can get married."

Probably, deep down in her heart, Patsy knew why he said it and what he really meant; but there would only be unhappiness in stating the truth, so she pretended to take what he said at face value.

But when she left she kissed the little manager very tenderly upon the lips. She had never done that before, and he knew that she would never do it again.

Sol was married before the end of the year, to a girl of his own religion who had always loved him. Nothing more had been said about the engagement between Patsy and himself until he had come to her for a release.

Patsy tried to tell him something of what was in her heart, and of what she thought was in his, but it seemed impossible. She laid his hand against her cheek—and that was all.

On the night of the two thousandth per-

formance of "The Main Highway," the new Mrs. Fink elected to grace the gala occasion in a box with all her diamonds. Sol, busy at the office, did not slip into the seat beside her until the third act was well under way. Patsy was saying:

"Dan, when you are very old, and death is standing at your bedside, if you feel a fluttering at your heart, it will only be my weary fingers come to rest at last. The warm tears on your cheek will be my tears."

Mrs. Fink wept frankly.

"Papa"—she reached out and found Sol's hand—"ain't it lovely that they mean it when they play that scene, and that they're going to be married, too, and be happy just like we are?"

Sol pressed her hand gently.

It was only a dream, anyway.

On the stage some one was saying from far away:

"The soft voice in your ear will be my voice whispering once more the words you have taught me to say—'Beloved, oh, my beloved!'"

THE HOLOCAUST

You bade me burn your letters—I obeyed;
Even now within the grate their embers fade;
But oh, I did it with reluctant heart,
For, while your words were mine to dream upon,
I still could dream that we did never part,
Nor need believe that you had really gone.
There were your hand and seal, dear evidence
That once you loved me—how you loved me then,
Careless of measure and of consequence,
As if young April held the flowering pen!
Such sweet, mad, soaring words that over and over
"I love you, love you, love you, O my lover!"
Reiterated, striving still to make
The splendid thing more true with saying it,
Till it might seem the very words did ache;
And through them all love's laughter and love's wit,
The lifeless paper throbbing like a heart
There in my hand—so magical your art
To fold yourself inside each word and be,
Even in a letter, close and safe with me.
Yea, all across the years, until to-day,
That packet of your letters still was you—
Still you, still mine, such living things were they,
Immortal essences of fire and dew;
But now, alas, even as they flamed away,
Faded, and vanished, you have vanished, too,
And only rustling ashes now remain.
I did your bidding, love, but oh, the pain!

Richard Leigh

Janet Prim, Janet Primitive

THE DAUGHTER OF THE REV. SAMUEL EVANS GOES TO A PARTY, WITH RESULTS THAT WERE IMPORTANT AND SURPRISING

By Ida Moulton Larson

IT was a little brown parsonage kitchen. It was not all brown, but in some way only that dun color made itself felt—brown wood, and brown linoleum, and even a lighter brown ceiling. The strip of blue and white wall that ran around above the high wainscot could not make an impression. The brown drowned it out, and controlled the kitchen as an undigested dinner controls the morning.

Even the sun that peeped in under the drooping eaves, as if it were looking beneath a reluctant hat, was soured by the brown, and turned a bilious yellow on the floor. It had, however, ventured a friendly word with the pink geranium on the sill. It usually had one with Janet—but not this morning.

The parsonage was brindly brown on the outside, too. At first it might appear that that was what made life within such a dull thing. Acquaintance with the Rev. Samuel Evans made it seem more probable that it was the brown of himself that had seeped through and stained the house. Disappointment had colored his life, and he let it shine through with all the vigor of a good deed in a naughty world.

Janet was brown, too. Thirty-two years of the Rev. Samuel had seen to that; but for some reason he had not reduced his daughter as utterly as he wished. Not that he grudged her happiness, but his goal of happiness had been set in the missionary field, and, failing this himself, he had craved it for his child. Poverty had intervened again, and her dead mother's blood, and the youth of a new age. Janet had quietly but persistently refused to look heathenward. Perhaps she had been surfeited at an early age.

Light still struggled through to touch up her brown. It fought for her hair, and still claimed a bit of it along the edges of the little waves. Her eyes had not given up, either. They had lovely tawny lights, and bits of eagerness peeped out as warily as mice.

The love and tenderness that father and daughter felt for each other peeped warily, too. It bridged the deep-hidden and almost unsuspected well of resentment that lay between them—a product of their diverging views of missions—and made Janet half mother to the dry, joyless minister. Recently the old well had been more or less forgotten for a new one quite as deeply hidden.

The cupboard door in the brown kitchen swung provokingly back, and was well slammed for its pains. Janet was having a morning after. Father's cup fell from its hook, smash into the middle of its saucer. Oh, dear! Another saucer to set aside with the others, like widows—widows in India, doomed to the meanest sort of service—holding a piece of soap, or a flowerpot, or a turnover while it baked.

"Why don't you say 'damn'?" tempted a voice outside the screen door.

"Oh, Mrs. Raynor!" cried Janet, recognizing the voice.

She unhooked the door soberly. Mrs. Raynor was getting the same sort of welcome that the sun had received.

The caller lounged across the room and hitched herself up on one corner of the table. She had a big bosom, and was older than she looked—though she said that she looked older than she was. She loved Janet, and, because of the Rev. Samuel, she usually came in the back way.

"I can pair the saucer with the one cup that's left over. Father won't miss this. For that matter, he wouldn't miss what goes in it."

Janet was gathering up the pieces. The handle, and the wedge that had stayed with it, she hung on her finger with elaborate care. Tears made it look crinkly. One tear dropped—then another.

"What is it, dear?"

Mrs. Raynor knew, but she asked. Janet did not answer at once.

"You know! You saw last night!"

Her back was to her guest now. Her voice was thick. She was beating vigorously at the batter that should presently be cup cakes.

Janet was living again the humiliation that she had suffered the night before. It was always so. She was sweet and attractive with women and children, but with the other sex she could only be bleakly formal or fussily attentive.

Aunt Martha had reared her. Aunt Martha knew how to safeguard a girl—just teach her that sex and love are nasty, and that a woman who drops her attitude of maidenly defense lays herself open to the charge of man chasing. The doctrine had worked tremendously to save Aunt Martha from those evils, so she passed it on to Janet. Janet did not believe it now, but she did not know how to unlearn it.

"It's that way every time!"

Janet's voice was shrill now, squeaking around sobs that crowded the way. Then, giving up, she wept frankly into the kitchen towel, pushing it up funnily under her spectacles.

Mrs. Raynor nursed her arms and waited. The sobs died away.

"You're not much of a gambler, Janet. You try to play the parson's daughter with a touch of the flapper; and all the time you have a lovely little game all of your own."

"I want to have a good time, like other girls!"

It was a cry born shortly after Eve unbalanced her rations. Janet didn't want Ladies' Aid good times, or church social good times, but the kind of good times that were even before Abraham built the altar. She didn't want to sit huddled with old women who had husbands and didn't care whether she got one or not, though they joked her about it.

Mrs. Raynor wanted Janet's recipe for lemon snaps. She lounged away with it—

but she did not forget. She frequented a group highly important to ministers, for who can arouse such torrents of eloquence as an ungodly, drinking, dancing, Sabbath breaking crowd whose every party is but the vestibule to hell? Janet had heard this last from her own father's lips the Sunday before, and had felt a frightened wish for one peep into the vestibule.

II

IN a day or two Mrs. Raynor's friend, Mrs. Holbond, was having a party. It was being arranged on short notice for a brother unexpectedly returned from a successful sojourn in Western oil fields. Somebody was ill. Did Mrs. Raynor know anybody to take her place? No, Mrs. Raynor did not. Wait a moment! Yes, yes, she believed she did. She would let Mrs. Holbond know in a few minutes.

"Want a party, Janet?" she asked, bursting in on more culinary devotions in the parsonage kitchen.

"Party! No!" Janet declined.

"But this is a real party, straight from the shell of a wounded oyster; and you're going to go with me and be dressed according to my Jezebel taste."

"Oh, I wouldn't dare!"

Janet's demur was quite contradicted by the longing in her eyes.

At seven o'clock the Rev. Samuel Evans swung his cheek around as far as his fixed eyes would permit, to receive a daughterly kiss.

"Good night, papa! I'm going out. I won't disturb you when I come in."

"Good night, daughter," he returned blandly, and with scant interest. "If you see Sister Force, tell her I should like the missionary report before Sunday."

"Yes, papa," Janet responded, with a blandness equal to his own; but that name had gone through her like a wire.

Was the indifference only a mask that the Rev. Samuel put on while he mentioned Mrs. Force? Janet would get that report and bring it to him herself. She had managed things so for almost a year. Lately she had hoped that the disgusting attraction had died down.

Mrs. Force was a widow, one of the church flock, who loved to manage things. She usually carried her way with a heavy hand and a persistent foot; but at one point Janet, with the gentle stubbornness

of her kind, had constantly thwarted the lady. When messages were to be carried, Janet carried them. When Mrs. Force called, Janet met her. When the minister visited the end of town where the lady lived, Janet managed to go along. In the very church and its parlors she usually found means to break up the innocent confabs that were sometimes managed—or was it only Mrs. Force who managed?

Janet loathed the thought of marriage for her father. She vaguely believed that she would marry some day, but her father—that was too dreadful to think of! Marriage meant intimacies—her mind revolted here. Nice girls didn't think of such things. At any rate, she could not think of her father marrying.

An hour after her father's good night, Janet's mirror reflected a blue funk.

"Cheer up, Janet!" commanded Mrs. Raynor, busy with comb and hairpins. "You're supposed to be enjoying yourself. Here, hand me that bandeau. Great stuff, this chestnut hair with golden glints!"

By and by Janet stared into the mirror. Whose face was that?

An amber-sprinkled bandeau tried to hold back the honey-colored waves that seeped underneath and ran over her brow. If it was a good thing to cover up any part of her body, surely it was a good thing to cover her forehead. Left to run at large, it had never given her other features a chance. It had jumped out and said "Boo!" The rest of her gentle face had never been able to cope with it; but she had not known that. Her eyes had been like sisters overawed by a booby brother bulging out and asserting himself.

And her chin—it was a nice chin now, soft and round, and not scared-looking. That trailing Greek knot at the back of her head wasn't much like the hard little bun she usually wore, either, twisted tight and stabbed with a great many pins.

Mrs. Raynor held up Janet's evening dress with an eye to its undoing.

"H-m! Out come Modesty's sleeves. Neck line's all right as it is. Brown silk isn't so bad with plenty of yellow. Ever wear earrings? Here, I brought a pair of mine—amber, and amber beads. No red rouge—yellow rouge for brown, Janet!"

Janet studied herself with the same frightened little glances she had dared on other sins.

"I look so—so different!" she gulped.

"We-e-ell!" said her friend. "I should hope so! What have I been struggling for? Warm up, child! Your nose is getting blue. Here—here's a fan to fumble. Hide your face, too, if you can't forget the sins of the world for this evening!"

Bareheaded, and out on the street that was the little town's thoroughfare of shops, Janet shivered and tried to make herself small. She hoped people would not know her when they met her.

Of course Mrs. Raynor must stop to buy a box of powder, and of course she must stop at Valley's, where the lights were brightest. Janet's face was burning, though she was icy cold with terror at this thing that she was doing.

Just then Mrs. Force came through the door of the shop. She led a group of Janet's associates. The good woman stared, sniffed evil, and stared again.

"Why, Janet Evans! I didn't know you!"—as if that numbered Janet among the lost. "Where in the world are you going?"

Weak-kneed, cowardly Janet! She was sick of it all. The vestibule looked horrid now. She wanted to slink back home and become once more the little smudge against the brown parsonage background. Her voice, when she replied to Mrs. Force, was like the stream that runs from a tap almost empty.

"I—I'm going to Mrs. Holbond's par—house."

"Why, Janet Evans!" Mrs. Raynor came up here. Mrs. Force broke off her reproof and looked at Janet sadly. Then she made quite the wrong remark. "You do look so funny!" she said.

It made medicine. Janet stiffened. Her eyes began at Sister Force's feet and worked deliberately upward, and there was something in them that drew into bold relief certain peculiarities of that lady's appearance. Sister Force was large, and inclined to swarthy, but she loved frivolous clothes, and simpered just a little to support them.

"Oh, do you think so? At that I don't believe I'm the funniest thing here!"

If Janet had suddenly exploded with a loud noise and much blue flame, she might have surprised the ladies equally.

Mrs. Raynor's arm was through Janet's, and they were out on the street again.

"Little wren lose her temper?" the chaperon queried.

"I'm a fool, and my head aches," the wren explained.

III

HERE was the party. The door unbuttoned the garment of the house and drew it over them. Janet was in the vestibule. One left things in a vestibule. What should she shed? Decency, sobriety, innocence? Or only the habit of viewing life as a few old men had set the standard years ago?

It paid to feel a fool, apparently. It made her cease to care—cease to worry about what people were thinking of her.

Hard lights, a crisscross of voices too loud to be heard—people all trying to assert themselves—all wishing to be heard, and none to hear—that was the party.

Mrs. Raynor's hand was on Janet's arm. Mrs. Holbond was shaking hands, a blank look and note behind her greeting. Then the guest of the evening—a wide, dark fellow with a mop of untidy black hair—came from behind a sofa to shake hands.

Janet's head gave a sudden whirl. There was a queer vision of a hairy savage creature lurking behind a tree, watching, not to save himself, but to use his power to best advantage. No, of course not! It was just a big, tousled man in a business suit and a Bryanesque grin.

He began pounding Mrs. Raynor on the back. She was an old school friend, and was supposed to like it.

"Hello, Hat! How's the little Juno?"

"Miss Evans, this is my brother, Martin Graff. Martin, this is Miss Evans, our—"

Janet cut her short. That hated formula—"Miss Evans, our minister's daughter"! It pigeonholed her at once; and nothing pleasant was ever put in beside her—just duties and matters of conscience.

She did an unaccountable thing.

"Don't tell him what I am, please!"

The black man had been turning to look over his shoulder. He turned back quickly when she said that.

"Now he really is looking at me," thought Janet, but she said nothing.

Mrs. Holbond blinked. Had she been missing something?

"Janet's got a headache," volunteered Mrs. Raynor over her *protégée's* silence.

"Headache?" boomed the black one kindly. "Now that's too bad! Say, I got something to cure that headache in short order. Come out in the kitchen, and I'll fix something that 'll cure it sure!"

He came around, put his hand on Janet, and led her along by the elbow.

"Little skinny thing like you ought not have headache. Leave that for old red fellows like me! Too much blood," he rumbled, piloting her to the sudden quiet of the kitchen.

He put her in a chair and went about opening and slamming ice box and cupboard doors, nonchalant in his shirt sleeves.

"Drink much?" he inquired, on his way to the pantry.

Janet thought he was being facetious. She always heard jokes about drinks at the church socials. It seemed to be a sort of substitute for the experience.

"No—not much," she said modestly.

A colorless fluid in the bottoms of two glasses accompanied his return.

"Little headache myself," he explained the second glass with the grin of a fellow conspirator.

Lemons, sugar, and a final shooting from a bottle whose content hissed engagingly as it escaped.

He handed her a glass. It tinkled delightfully as she shook it and bits of ice tickled its sides.

"Now! Swallow this tablet and then drink the real cure," he directed, reserving the larger dose for himself and leaning against the ice chest.

Janet sipped analytically.

"It's a kind of soda water, isn't it?"

"Yep, soda water—that's the word. Same old soda water!"

"It's good, but it's strong."

"Ought to be good, price I paid!"

"Is it such expensive medicine?"

The minister's daughter was making polite conversation.

"Yeah, the medicine is," he replied, laughing and slapping his leg.

He met Janet's innocent gaze, and the laugh oozed away; but she had not minded. Somehow she wasn't caring whether he laughed or not. She eyed him soberly over the rim of her glass.

He drained his drink at a gulp and watched her consume her portion. She drank slowly, blinking a little at the strength of the stuff.

"Don't you folks use that kind of medicine?" he asked elaborately careless, and taking her glass.

"No. What is it?"

"Don't rightly know myself any more. Family's used it for years."

"It made my head feel better, anyhow," she said, turning her face up and smiling easily.

He grinned in return, and suddenly the flash of his white teeth set him back thousands of years, made him that queer lurking creature she had glimpsed before; but she did not care.

"Let's wash these dishes," she trilled, jumping up.

She took them to the spring at the side of the cave, and sloshed with reckless abandon. It didn't matter. They were only shells, and the earth would drink up the water. The caveman took them dripping, and once he took her hand, too. The shell dropped with a smash. That didn't matter, either. She said so. No—the caveman said so.

He stooped to pick up the pieces. She dropped her hand to the shaggy coat of skins he wore. Oh, it was his head, not his coat at all! He laughed at the mistake, too.

"Do you know, I like to wash dishes here!" she caroled.

The sun was shining outside. At the door she halted. Why, of course! It was the party. There was Mrs. Raynor—beautiful, beautiful Mrs. Raynor. Pretty soon Janet would go over and tell her how beautiful she was. And there was Art Miske. He gave somebody ten dollars for the playground fund last week. She would thank him for that pretty soon, too. He was busy dealing cards just now.

Her black man stood with her in the door.

"What shall we do?" he asked. "Want to go and dance on the sun porch?"

"I don't know how to dance, but"—very brightly—"let's play post office! I never did, but I know how."

Janet was giggling.

"You do?" he cried, reaching around to put one hand upon the wall behind her.

His bold black eyes looked curiously into hers, probing to find what lay behind them; and the very ease of the probing baffled him. He turned to the company.

"Say, folks!" he whooped joyously. "Post office! What about good old-fashioned post office?"

"Now, Martin!" reproved his sister.

"Sure! When a thing's old enough, it's new. Come on, you gambling hounds!"

Art Miske began counting up the score.

"All right! For that your missis is go-

ing to get a letter," an unenthusiastic loser warned him.

"They don't bother with post office these days. Just go to it!" came a man's voice.

There were various cries:

"Now, Marge, you got to play fair!"

"Say, Martin, you needn't send me any letters!"

"I'm going to be postmaster, so I can see things!"

Janet became very grave. Her glasses seemed curiously in the way. She took them off and whirled them in her fingers.

"What shall I do with them?" she asked Martin, who had come to stand beside her while the mail was being sorted from the crowd.

Martin pondered.

"Cache 'em," he suggested.

She watched him get down on all fours, creep to the mouth of a little cave, and slide them in. No—it wasn't a cave at all. He only put them under the buffet.

By and by the postmaster bellowed for Janet. She had been sitting patiently, for what seemed a long time, on the stairs.

Deep, deep satisfaction somewhere within—a promise of something to perfect what was imperfect—lovely adventure, breathless reaching out to it; then the dark cave where the mail was delivered, the nearness of somebody, and big arms closing slowly, wonderfully about her. She felt a rough coat under one cheek, and warm breath pouring over the other. There was one delicious moment, then—fear!

All at once the restraint of the arms, their hint of capture, the feeling as they pressed about her, became unbearable. She struggled—struggled to escape, struggled for breath.

"No! No!" she gasped.

"Yes—you will—here!" the man's voice said, not steady, and surprisingly close to her ear.

She ground her face into the rough coat. Her nose scraped stingingly on a button. She begged. Slowly the powerful hold loosened. The big hands slipped down her arms, but caught at her slender fingers. Martin knew his girl now.

"You aren't afraid of me, are you?"

It was the old question that always hopes for an affirmative answer.

"No—only I don't want to play post office. It's so silly," she replied breathlessly, drawing away to smooth her hair.

Out in the hall it was better. Martin arranged the cushions on the window seat, even placing one for her feet.

"Better have some refreshments," he suggested.

The big cushion on the floor reminded Janet of something—"sit on a cushion." She felt very serious, and moved to sit precisely in its center. She quoted:

"But sit on a cushion and sew a fine seam,
And feed upon strawberries, sugar, and cream."

The assertive male had fallen back. The female was looking over her shoulder.

"There's more to that, if I remember right," Martin commented vaguely.

"Only in 'Mother Goose.'"

"Say the rest of it, and you shall have your strawberries!"

He was close again, leaning over her and trying to make her look at him.

"No," she said, nodding slowly. "I want to eat now!"

"When will you tell me the rest?"

"At two o'clock next week," she promised glibly, with a phrase that she had heard from a high school boy.

IV

THE effect of Martin's prescription wore away. It had done its work, and withdrew unnoticed; but it had established their acquaintance, and that value persisted.

Time to go home! Martin extracted Janet from the group that was carrying her off.

"You'll have to find somebody else, Hat. I'm seeing Nellie home myself—and we don't need you, either!"

Out under the stars Janet was Janet. She looked up and wondered what it would be like to be out there so far that the earth looked just like any other planet. Would she be Janet then, and a preacher's daughter, or would everything be—

Martin's arm held hers too close. She drew it away, but his big hand caught her own and laid it gently on his sleeve.

"Isn't that all right?" he inquired, and she was enfolded by the tone more than she had been by the arm.

While she was undressing that night, little red flames kept creeping up into her face. They made her look like a flower that must be gloriously red at heart to shoot its crimson to the very last encircling petal.

In the afternoon, Janet helped in the li-

brary. That next day Martin looped himself over her desk and embarrassed her horribly by talking in tones much too loud. They boomed in that quiet place like sunflowers at a funeral. Hushed down, he developed a whisper of even greater acoustic properties, and she only got rid of him by promising to go riding that evening.

She was to meet him at Mrs. Raynor's. She had suggested that arrangement herself. The thought of having him drive up to the parsonage door frightened her. It made her feel guilty, too. When Mrs. Force walked up to the parsonage door—

She did not like Martin so well this time. He was the domineering male, showing off his new roadster, endangering her with terrific bursts of speed, rescuing her bravely by slowing down. He stopped once on a hill, and Janet was just seeing him crawl into her nice safe cave when another car drew up beside them, and he took his arm away.

On Saturday afternoon she started out with her class of girls on their weekly bird walk, and Martin attached himself as they left town. He had boxes of candy, bulgy sacks of fruit, and a well of information. Hadn't he gone swimming here and hunting there, and hadn't he fallen out of the very tree they had marked for an oriole's nest? The girls were for voting him an honorary member at once.

When they got back to town, he left Janet at the corner, with the announcement that he was coming to call that evening. She reached home just as the worst gossip in the church was leaving her father's study. Father had been hearing things!

She crept out of that room horror-stricken. She had looked into a queer mirror that gave back a distortion of her innocence and ignorance. What must every one—what must Martin—think of her? What could she think of herself?

Her father greeted Martin at the door that evening. Janet slunk into a corner of the brown kitchen, where she could peep out of the window and watch her lover come—and go. She watched him walk away, and sickened at the cockiness of his swagger. He didn't care!

On Sunday the Rev. Samuel Evans found the rapt attention of Martin's big bulk, well up in front, a flattering thing. Toward the last he felt uncomfortably that there was something in the attention not so

flattering. Janet kept her head well down, and did not once look that way; but she had combed her hair the way Mrs. Raynor had taught her.

Her little face was rather gray that week, and ashamed—so ashamed! For once her father felt that his teachings were going home. He had never been so tender. He longed to comfort her, and worked clumsily about the house, offering balm of badly washed cups and lumpy beds. She turned to him dumbly. Mrs. Force was forgotten. Father and home were a refuge.

On the street, she slipped back and forth, hardly raising her eyes. Somehow, though, she managed to see Martin flashing around with pretty Mrs. Drayton, who taught school and supported her little girl. Janet wondered if Martin's arms—

Then on Friday afternoon he came to the library with his little nephew. Janet heard him before he came into the room, and bent her face over her cards. She wondered dimly if she were very ill.

She waited a long time. Surely he must be gone! She had to look up. He was holding a book and staring at her over the top. When she finally got her glance away from him, she wondered if she could be dying.

On the next day her girls were gathering for the walk. Wasn't Mr. Graff going? They were sweet, and they loved her, but that did not curb their cruelty. They pried. Janet thought there was something artful behind their questions. Had they been warned? She never knew just how she had carried it off with them.

They were leaving the edge of the town when a car tore up behind them and stopped. Janet heard it before the others did. She did not turn her head, but she knew who was coming.

Martin's short, thick figure shot out from under the wheel. The girls shrieked a welcome. Janet flushed and paled, and could hardly speak.

"Janet—er—Miss Evans is going with me. We'll be waiting for you at the old wheel mill."

Babbling questions, demanding instructions, the girls laughed. Visions of good times to follow fired their enthusiasm.

V

JANET found herself on the soft, enveloping cushions. Had he put his arm around her before the girls? She thought

he had. He stooped so low that she thought he was going to kiss her. The best she could do was to keep from reaching forward to those big red lips. He laughed into her eyes.

"Did you think I would go?" he asked. She was not sure what he meant; but at any rate he was here now. "I didn't understand, at first," he went on. "You know I wouldn't hurt you, don't you, Janet?"

Janet nodded. She did know that.

Then, for a time, he seemed to pay her scant attention. The wind whistled by until it seemed as if they must have left the earth. She closed her eyes and imagined that they were up where earth values did not reach, where things were as they really were, not made over to suit custom. She dropped her hand to the seat between them, and could feel the warmth of his thick leg.

Here was the mill, a wreck of a roof over a broken wheel that clogged the little stream in revenge for past years of driving. It was a lovely, lonely, and woodsy place. When they stopped, the quiet was as tangible as the sunshine.

He turned toward her. All at once he was that primitive man again. She was afraid of his hands—of his teeth. She felt the area under her arms creep at the thought of his clasp. She flashed out to the ground.

He did not hurry. He even stopped for a moment to lift the hood and look at the engine. Then he stood beside her, his hands on the door, imprisoning her in the circle.

"See here, Janet, you promised to tell me something at two o'clock this week!"

Janet could only shake her head.

"You know," he prompted. "That 'Mother Goose' thing about strawberries and cream."

"I don't know—"

"This is the last two o'clock in the week."

"But, Mr. Graff—"

"Look here!" He flourished something from his pocket—a crumpled, dog-eared scrap of a book. "I had no faith in your word about it, so I hunted this out of the small nephew's closet myself. Listen!

"Goldilocks, Goldilocks, wilt thou be mine? Thou shalt not wash the dishes nor yet feed the swine,

But sit on a cushion and sew a fine seam,
And feed upon strawberries, sugar, and cream."

He waited for a moment.

"How about it, Goldilocks?" he asked gently.

Huge waves of sound rolled into Janet's ears and settled heavily on her tongue, until it seemed as if her neck would break. The little book flew out toward the creek. Martin's arm went around her and pinned her arms fast. His other hand pulled off her spectacles and tossed them into the seat.

She fought him, the queer feeling of his clasp was so terrifying. She could not bear it!

He did not let her go this time. He held her closer, until she lay against him helpless. She felt his breath again. She thought of his flashing white teeth; but he was trembling, too. Was he afraid? She looked up.

"You kiss me, Janet!"

His hot, eager lips—they were gentle, too—gathered her own in a kiss that he tore from her heart.

Was it a kiss? It was a journey that took them away from the world. They were alone, and there was no law except the one that had made the world, no custom but that of obeying the law. The next time his lips came, they found their answer. She wanted to go on answering until she died.

She turned in his arms, but he would not let her go. She leaned back against him, and could hear his heart pounding in his great chest. He stooped and kissed the curve of her neck just under her ear. She broke free from his arms and leaned against the car.

"No, Martin, no! Don't kiss me again! I want to think."

"You'll have to marry me, Janet. I can't live without you now!"

"Why, of course, Martin!"

Had the old Janet ever thought otherwise? She saw his hand, unsteady, beside her own on the door of the car. It was so hairy and strong! She laid her cheek against it this time. Then Janet the primitive looked back and brought to account Janet the prim.

"Martin, do you suppose father and Mrs. Force could be in love, too? I've been so cruel! Do you suppose I've spoiled it for them?"

Martin considered the dry minister and the lady with her furbelows. If all the world loves a lover, then as truly the lover loves all the world.

"If it was love, you couldn't spoil it," he said. "Look at us! Maybe we can help 'em. Your dad sure turned me out and shut the gate, but I guess we can build a bigger fence that takes him in, too," he whispered, for Janet was once more within whispering distance.

THE SONG OF A HEART

Why did I let you go?
I want you back now
Night and morning and noon.
The old, old moon
That was young, virginal as snow,
When you were near,
Is shriveled and black now.
My dear, my dear,
Why did I let you go?

Oh, but I love you so!
Had I the choice now,
What hours would I not give
Just to relive
That moment in the full-moon glow
Of last July;
Just to hear your voice now
Break, and that cry:
"Oh, but I love you so!"

Richard Butler Glaenser

Indian Summer Girlhood

A STORY OF COMPLICATIONS IN THE LOVE AFFAIRS OF AN
OLDER AND A YOUNGER GENERATION

By Lolita Anna Westman

AS the big car, on high, swung around a curve in the driveway, its headlights brought from obscurity, in vivid splashes, the ivy-covered stone wall, the shedding trees, and the rain-made gullies brimming with dead leaves. Sweeping comprehensively over the garden, the gleam struck the tennis court, the arbor and well, then the sun porch and the upper balcony of the house, where the diamond-paned windows sparkled.

As the wheels grazed the lower step, the lights swept downward to the veranda, discovering the figure of a girl—her eyes arrestingly eager, her hands under the big collar of her coat, pushing it up to meet her halo of bobbed hair. Vibrating impatiently, the car merely paused while Sherwood Swickard flung open the door and leaned out to call:

"Better bring a hat, Nettie!"

"It isn't cold enough for that," Annette Templeton vetoed, as she climbed in, to be precipitated into the cushioned seat as they jerked forward again.

"Right-o!" Swickard accepted. "Want the wind shield up?"

"No, thanks!"

Shifting his position to smooth out the bump in his overcoat, Swickard, with a boyish spontaneity that belied his thirty-three years, exclaimed as he settled back in the seat:

"Well, old girl, I ought to get a medal! Only six minutes since I got your ring! Some speed, eh?"

"Is that clock right?" she asked with apparent irrelevance.

The subtle maturity underlying the childish quality of her voice brought Swickard's gaze from the road to her profile. The curve of her determined little chin filled him with a vague uneasiness. For

the first time he gave serious thought to the urgency of her telephone summons. Was something really the matter—something serious?

Recalling her question, he consulted his watch.

"Yes, Nettie—nine seven is right."

Then, concluding that his reasoning was somehow faulty—nothing really serious could happen to his sensible little friend—he rounded the curve that took them out of the grounds to Hardscrabble Road, and asked cheerfully:

"Well, Nettie—where to?"

She answered his question with disconcerting directness.

"You know the road into Scarsdale—left of Central Avenue?" she said.

"Beyond the Shady Nook?"

"Yes."

"K. O.," he nodded, as he turned into Bedford Road.

She laid her hand on Swickard's arm—that confiding little gesture of hers to draw his attention—but when he said, "Yes, Net?" her reply somehow conveyed the impression of evasion, even as it denoted emotional stress.

"We've got to hurry like everything, Sherry!"

For answer he stepped on the accelerator. Something *was* the matter! She hadn't been able to blurt out her troubles with her customary candor. Ordinarily he wouldn't have been able to squeeze in a word edgewise.

Nettie had never been addicted to flapperism, although she was the proper age for such nonsense; but that didn't prevent this from being a transgression. That was it—the poor kiddie was in some sort of hole, and naturally was looking to Swickard to dig her out!

He shrugged his muffler away from his perspiring neck—it wasn't as cold as he had thought—and wondered if he had brought enough cigarettes. It was likely to be a late job!

He tried to be nonchalant, to ease the embarrassment of confession.

"Say, Nettie, there are limits to a man's patience. You get an old bachelor out of his easy chair at the disgraceful hour of nine, and then you won't condescend to give him an explanation!"

He saw her lips tighten as she swallowed. She buried her nose in the folds of the collar on the shoulder away from him, and spoke without turning.

"I hate to tell—even you, Sherry," she said.

That made his laugh difficult.

"Is it as bad as that, old kid?"

His gentle camaraderie gave her the courage to say in a strained voice:

"Mother—has eloped!"

II

An instant passed before the revelation penetrated Swickard's wall of complacent counselorism. Then he breathed:

"My God!"

The car swerved and headed for the ditch, but his hands mechanically guided it back to safety.

"Who?" he demanded raspingly.

"Elmer Royton."

"Nettie!"

"Lindy found the note—the one he wrote—in her room."

Swickard's lips set even as Annette's had done. Lines deepened around his eyes. He seemed to put on, in that moment, twenty years; but, rallying, he burst out:

"My God, Nettie, does she know what he is?"

Nettie's hands were gripping the seat. Now that the need for restraint had disappeared with her admission, words tumbled forth.

"I've told her, Sherry. I've begged her not to go around with him. She wouldn't listen!"

"Did you tell her—"

"Everything, Sherry! I told her how you got Arline out of that scrape, and that Arline had told me all about him; but mother wouldn't believe it. She said Arline had either vamped him or made up the story out of whole cloth."

"She can't—love him!"

Swickard's declaration was a prayer.

"Oh, Sherry, I don't know! In the last year she's thought she was in love seven times, to my knowledge. I've just had an awful time with her!"

"Did the flames—die?"

"Yes, or I talked her out of them; but this time she's been determined to go through with it, in spite of everything. Every one in Pleasantville is talking about her—at the club—everywhere."

"Does she know it?"

"Yes, and she just laughs that defiant, silvery laugh of hers!"

"She must love him!" Swickard said hoarsely.

"She doesn't know what she's doing!" Nettie cried passionately. "She's just an inexperienced kid!"

He felt no desire to laugh. He knew that what Nettie said was true. Celia Templeton might, in truth, have been the veriest kid instead of the thirty-three years he knew her to have numbered.

"Nettie, you know I don't mix at the clubs, so that I wouldn't find out in that way. Why didn't you tell me what was going on?"

"I—I couldn't, Sherry. I was ashamed of her, but I thought some day she'd settle down."

"It's all my fault," he blamed himself bitterly. "If I hadn't been a fool, this wouldn't have happened. Now I've lost her again. Oh, don't you understand, Nettie—we're too late!"

"Too late for what?"

"She's run away with Elmer Royton because she loves him. What right have we to stop her?"

"Oh, no, Sherry!" she denied chokingly. "I—I can't believe she loves him. She's just been in a convent all her life, and she's sowing her wild oats while she's young enough to enjoy it!"

"Nettie, she's a woman, not a youngster. She knows where that sort of thing will land her."

"She hasn't the faintest idea," Nettie contradicted. "She thinks all men are the same as dad was. She trusts everybody." Then, clutching his sleeve convulsively, she struggled on: "Sherry, we've got to catch them! We've got to!"

"How long have they been gone?" inquired Swickard.

"She was to meet him down at the gate at half past eight. As soon as Lindy found

the note near mother's bed post, she brought it right to me. We telephoned the garage, but Hanlon said she'd taken the car."

"What did she wear?" questioned Swickard through locked teeth.

"Her new blue suit with the collar and cuffs, and her gray hat—with a veil. Lindy and I looked in the closet after I phoned you." Nettie seemed like a very little girl as she put her hand over his on the steering wheel. "Sherry"—her lips trembled pitifully—"if anything happens to her, I shall die!"

His breath came in queer spurts.

"If she marries Elmer Royton, Nettie," he said, "life won't be worth living."

"If he does marry her, Sherry—if he does!"

"He wouldn't dare do anything else!"

Suddenly Swickard felt cold steel on his fingers. Looking down, he found that Nettie was thrusting a gun into his hand.

"In case he does, Sherry," she was whispering, "I brought this!"

"Thanks," he said with simple unemotionalism, feeling around for the pocket in his overcoat where the gun would be ready to his hand.

He was not surprised at Nettie's calm forethought. The protective instinct had always been her dominating characteristic. She had taken care of her father to the last, and she had mothered Celia afterward. Their need of her had made her a little woman at five. She had been the only connecting link between her parents.

And yet Nettie herself was a cuddly little person. She rather gave the impression, at times, that she would like to have some one else do her thinking for her; that she was tired of being the head of the house at eighteen. Perhaps that was why Swickard had made her his pal. She had seemed somehow alone, just as he was alone.

Nettie's head was bowed low against the wind that blew her hair into her eyes.

"The trouble is, Sherry, mother's never grown up," she analyzed. "Dad treated her as a child, and I've babied her. She's had her own way too long. What she needs is caveman stuff—the real kind, from a man who loves her!"

Swickard's face set into determined lines, and his hands on the wheel were veined as he stiffened them.

"By Jove, Nettie!" he gritted. "She's going to get it, if I have to commit murder

and robbery and kidnaping! There'll be no half measures this time!"

"Sherry, I don't understand," the girl faltered.

"Oh, don't you see? I've loved her ever since she was fourteen years old, Nettie. I wanted her then and I've wanted her every minute since. Like a fool, I didn't tell her. I thought it was too soon after your father's death!"

Nettie was too stunned to do more than stare at the man—at his fiery black eyes and his thrust-out jaw. Surely this was not the Sherwood Swickard she knew! It couldn't be! It couldn't! Why, Sherry belonged to her! She loved him—had loved him since she was a little girl and he had walked to Sunday school with her. Oh, no—it couldn't be true that she had just been to him—a substitute for her mother!

Flattering herself that her reply was merely expressive of a profound surprise, that it gave no inkling of the sinking sensation in her heart, she leaned unconsciously toward him.

"Oh, you mean—that years ago—"

"Yes, Nettie!"

"And she—married father?"

"Yes!"

His words were clipped, as if though he were afraid of his own emotion.

"Did she—love him?" Nettie asked.

"Nettie, how could she love a man three times her age? She was only fifteen when her mother, who was dying, made her promise to marry Norman Templeton, your father."

"So that he would take care of her?"

"Yes."

"And he did, Sherry. He was good to her. He—he worshiped her, I think."

"Your father was a fine man, Nettie," he said tensely; "but he was too great a philosopher to think of a wife. He was wedded to books."

They were on the Sawmill River Road now, taking the bumps at fifty-two miles. Swickard was silent so long that Nettie, from the depths of her despondency, prompted:

"And what did you do?"

His hand pounded on the wheel.

"What could I do? Coming back from a trip to Chicago—finding her married! I left for South America on a bridge project, and stayed there eight years."

"And it didn't—cure you?"

"No! I had her in my blood, Nettie! The sight of her married to a man she didn't love was maddening; but I couldn't stay away from Pleasantville forever, and I knew I'd run into her—so I had to conquer it."

Nettie's face was white, her lips were parched, her features were drawn into lines of suffering.

"Did—mother love you?" she asked, with a prayer that his answer would make her course clear.

"She was too much of a wife to let me even guess. Oh, I don't know, Nettie! I have no proof that she ever did or does now. I've let her go—when I might have found out!" He paused for a moment to regain control of his voice, then added blunderingly: "Nettie—there isn't any one—I could tell, but you. There isn't any one—who would understand—the years and the waiting—only to see her gone!"

The pressure of Nettie's fingers on his arm spelled comfort to him.

"Thanks!" he gulped. "You've been a brick!"

Nettie forced the sobs into her throat, and blinked to keep back the rush of tears. It had all been a dream—a silly dream. She had been asleep. Now her awakening was rude. He had never loved her! It was her mother, Celia Templeton.

Their friendship was ended. All the years of their comradeship meant nothing. He didn't want her. No more rides with the wind blowing in their faces! No more parties! No more friendly talks in his study! He wouldn't scold her; she wouldn't cajole. He wouldn't dry her tears, because now she wouldn't tell him her troubles!

The little home that she had built in her dreams was tumbling down, block by block. There were cold ashes in that dream fireplace. Everything was gone—gone—gone!

III

"ANNETTE," Swickard asked in a voice that the passing minutes had quieted, "what does the note say—the one Royton wrote?"

"It's in my pocket, Sherry. Just a minute!"

Should she let him see it? She could claim to have forgotten it in the excitement. She could say that she didn't remember where her mother was going.

Then, if Celia married Elmer Royton, perhaps Sherry might—

Why not? Nettie's youth gave her the right to love. Her mother was thirty-three—too old for romance!

"Find it, Nettie?" he asked.

Her fingers closed upon the piece of paper in her pocket, and drew it out.

"Yes, Sherry," she whispered, throwing away her hope of happiness.

There was nothing heroic, nothing martyrlike, about her renunciation. It was simply the only thing to do. Celia Templeton was her mother, and therefore entitled to first choice. Celia had wasted eighteen years of her youth because of a promise. It was her turn to live now!

But, just the same, Nettie's heart felt heavy, and the future seemed black. Her silent tears dropped upon the letter that she read to Sherry:

MY DARLING CELIA:

Meet me at 8.30 at the gate. I dare not come nearer the house. First, my little sweetheart, to the Moonlight Inn. Then to the little town where I have arranged for our wedding. After that—a honeymoon with you—always and always!

ELMER.

Swickard's voice was ominously calm.

"We'll be there in about ten minutes," he approximated.

They didn't converse after that. Swickard gave his attention to the road. He turned in at Platt Avenue, and thence into Scarsdale. From there it was a matter of minutes before they drove into the grounds surrounding the Moonlight Inn.

Lights blazed at them from the windows and doors, and the jazz music quickened their pulses. There was nothing questionable about the Moonlight Inn. The prices made it one of the most exclusive places in Westchester.

Parking as near the inn as the other cars would permit, Swickard walked back, with Nettie at his side. When they asked for Mr. Royton and Mrs. Templeton, the doorman smilingly informed them that they were expected, and ushered them to the elevator in the rear. Wondering, but congratulating themselves upon their good luck, they were taken up to a room on the second floor.

In answer to Swickard's knock came Elmer Royton's deep bass:

"Come in!"

They found the runaways sitting opposite each other at a delightfully arranged

dinner table. The evidence that automatically presented itself to Swickard, as he looked from Celia to Royton, made him feel absurdly melodramatic. The dinner was being conducted in a perfectly proper way. Royton was neither drunk nor brutal—defying all the traditions of the stage and screen. He had risen to his feet, and was regarding them with frank surprise, without losing any of his polish, his suavity.

Celia's fingers still daintily clasped the handle of her coffee cup. The white lace collar of her dress brought out the youthful contour of her exquisitely chiseled features, aglow as from an inner fire. She had removed her hat—she shared Nettie's aversion to hats—and her hair, russet-colored, added to her height. Slender, tall, beautiful—that was Celia.

It was impossible to read the expression in her dark eyes. The long lashes veiled them with recurring frequency during the moments that followed.

"Well, Swickard!" Royton was saying with an easy smile. "This is a surprise! And—Annette, how do you do?" He bowed slightly. "Won't you sit down? We've finished dinner, but surely you'll join us in a demi-tasse?"

"No," refused Swickard, coldly meeting the other's eyes. "I prefer to choose my table companions."

Royton would have sensed Swickard's antagonism even without the deliberate insult, but he did not retaliate in like manner. If possible, he became a shade more suave.

"As you will," he shrugged. "And—Miss Annette shares your views?" he added, turning smilingly to Nettie.

She had never found him so wholly repulsive. Her little chin went up, and she swept him with a youthfully contemptuous glance, which he suffered painfully. Women hated to gainsay Royton; he looked so hurt.

Ignoring him completely, Nettie turned to her mother. There was a soft huskiness in her voice. She might have been chiding a child, or a man.

"Please put on your hat, mother!" she said.

Celia's beautiful eyebrows went up, and she smiled faintly.

"Why, Nettie, dear, you surprise me!" she marveled. "Put on my hat? Why should I? I'm not ready to go."

"I beg your pardon, but you are," Nettie said with firm gentleness.

Celia frowned—a frown that was altogether charming. She never lost her temper. At all times she remained mistress of herself; but her anger was manifested in the roses in her cheeks, in the defiant snap in her eyes, and in the trembling of her lips—like wind on rose petals.

Nettie felt that anger was imminent now. It was in her mother's voice, though she laughed.

"How delightful! Elmer, you now observe the lengths to which flapperism has gone. One's daughter commands one as if our positions were reversed!"

"Extraordinary!" remarked Royton, tapping the end of his cigarette against the case. "You know, Annette, a little corporal punishment wouldn't hurt any of the younger set. If you were my daughter—"

"I think," said Celia with exasperating slowness, "I like your suggestion, Elmer. It may be the only way. There are some privileges that every mother should be allowed without interference."

Nettie's cheeks were flaming now. Nevertheless, her voice was quite steady as she answered:

"If one has a flapper mother, the only way to make her behave is to treat her as if she were sixteen. Are you coming home with me?"

Celia crossed her pretty ankles, took out a cigarette, and replied languidly:

"Decidedly not!"

She had the cigarette lit when Swickard reached her side, and, snatching it out of her hand, ground it under his heel. Towering over her, he ordered with peculiar softness:

"Put on your hat!"

Celia's nostrils quivered as her breath left her. Then her chest expanded rapidly as she refilled her lungs.

"Not until I get good and ready, my dear Sherry," she drawled.

Swickard's hand caught her wrist. His face was set, unyielding.

"Are you going to make me—force you?" he demanded through white lips.

Her gaze holding his, she got slowly to her feet.

"Sherry," she said quietly, "you're hurting my wrist."

His hold did not slacken, though her soft breath so close to his cheek made him dizzy.

"You're coming home with me," he said distinctly. "You are through with Elmer Royton!"

"By what right do you issue orders—to me?" she protested.

"By the right of the man you are going to marry!"

She winced under the tightness of his hold, and her eyes smarted, but she laughed—one of her laughs like running water over a stone.

"My dear Sherry, you are as surprising as Nettie was!"

Royton's amused chuckle broke in.

"I'm afraid you're taking too much for granted, Swickard. That sort of thing isn't done, you know. Mrs. Templeton has shown no preference for your caveman methods."

"That is for her to say!" snapped Swickard.

"You have heard my decision," Celia said, scorning to rub the discolored wrist that he had released.

"Decision is not your prerogative!" Swickard gritted, repeating to himself the advice that Nettie had given him—"What she needs is caveman stuff—the real kind, from a man who loves her." "I have asked you to decide nothing," he continued doggedly. "I have commanded you to come with me."

There was a movement behind Swickard.

"Enough of this farce!" exclaimed Royton, throwing his cigarette in a tray on the table and advancing toward the other. "Swickard, you are butting in on a party where your presence is certainly not desired. If you don't leave within two minutes, I shall ring for the manager."

"When he arrives," Swickard matched him, "he will be greeted with—this!"

He whipped out the revolver and covered Royton.

"Ah!" sneered the other man. "Did you learn this gun play down in South America?"

"Precisely—to deal with blackguards like you. Royton, I'm not mincing words. I could tell a tale that would put you out of the way for two years, at least. The quicker you leave here, the better!"

"Yes? I'm sure I won't mind leaving—providing Mrs. Templeton accompanies me. You see, Mrs. Templeton has promised to marry me."

Nettie came between them. Her lips were curled scornfully.

"Mr. Royton, there was a time when you promised to marry Arline Hunter, but you retracted the promise!"

It was a fearless accusation that Swickard would have liked to make, but wouldn't have made under any circumstances. Royton had the grace to flush under his tan.

"Mrs. Templeton is at liberty to retract hers," he said softly. "She knows what I've been, but I love her, and I shall feel honored if she will be my wife. I can only rest my case."

He was undermining them with a simple statement of his intentions. It was apparent to both Swickard and Nettie that, whatever Elmer Royton's past had been, he loved Celia in his own peculiar fashion. That he stood ready to marry her there could be no doubt. What would Celia say? After all, it was her future that was at stake.

Nettie awaited the verdict with bated breath. She was not at all certain what her mother would do. Swickard showed the strain in his eyes. Had he overplayed his rôle of conquering hero?

Celia's eyes were more beautiful than ever, because there was a sadness in them—an indefinable sadness. Extending her hand to Elmer, she said softly:

"Please go. I'll ring you up in the morning."

He pleaded his cause with his eyes for a moment, and, bringing her fingers to his lips, brushed them lightly. Then, procuring his hat, he bowed to the others and left them—confident, triumphant. His faith in his own powers was amazing. He had never lost a battle of love, and he thought he could predict the end of this one.

IV

WHEN the door had closed, Celia turned to Swickard. Her voice was rather tired, and her shoulders drooped.

"Well, are you satisfied now? You have won."

"Won—what?"

"The privilege of driving me home."

"Thanks!" snapped Swickard, viciously restoring the gun to his pocket—feeling foolish and looking it. "Let's go."

"All right!" she said. Then, suddenly turning to him, her hands outstretched, her expressive shoulders raised, she demanded: "Why did you do this, Sherry—why?"

His hands were clenched at his sides.

"Because I love you," he said hoarsely.

"Love me?" she repeated derisively, and turned away.

His hands clamped her arm and whirled her to face him again.

"I love you—do you hear?"

"Don't lie to me, Sherry!" she implored breathlessly.

His restraint snapped. His blood was on fire as he took a step toward her. Drawing her into his arms, he kissed her, wildly, passionately.

Tense at first, the life gradually seemed to leave her. Weakly but completely she relaxed in his arms, her hands on his face as if she would never let him go!

Nettie, watching from her place at the door, forgotten, felt herself growing cold, then hot. With an agonized moan she covered her face with her hands, her bobbed hair screening the scene before her.

Love? Her mother too old? Nettie realized that Celia's love was the biggest and the most complete of any she had ever seen. Some of her friends had been in love, but not like Celia.

An unearthly light shone in Celia's dewy eyes, and there was a throbbing in her throat. Even her hair seemed to be on fire; and yet how gentle, how maternal, was the touch of her fingers on Sherwood's cheek. Her voice, when she spoke, was ripe with maturity, yet contained the first flush of youth. Full, resonant, beautiful, it told Sherwood Swickard things that he had waited twenty years to hear—things that brought tears of regret and of happiness to his eyes.

"Ah, Sherry!" it said. "You've come—you've come! I thought you'd always come—too late!"

"My darling!" Swickard whispered huskily against the perfume of her hair. "You love me! Say that you do!"

"I do! I do! I do!" she cried. "I have always loved you—always! I hoped you'd take me before this, but you wouldn't until I fixed up a hoax!"

"I had to wait, because of—"

"Oh, Sherry, two years! Why? Why?"

So she had suffered in the two years since her husband's death! Was he a fool that he had almost lost her again?

"If you hadn't come to-night, dearest, I'd have married Elmer, because I'd have known you didn't love me. Oh, Sherry, I wrote the note from Elmer and left it so that Lindy could find it! I knew Nettie

would bring you—and I left word downstairs for you to be sent up. I had to know whether you cared, Sherry—I had to!"

"You mean you had no intention of eloping?"

"Not to-night, anyway, dearest—except with you!"

He held her away from him.

"Will you?"

A youthful blush suffused her cheeks, and daring mischief twinkled in her eyes, as she nodded excitedly.

"Any time you say!"

Swickard's laugh was boyishly triumphant as he took her in his arms.

V

NETTIE had gone—down the stairs, past the door, in her headlong flight to the car. She wanted to hide until she could conquer the thumping of her heart, until she could banish forever those telltale tears!

Near the doorway, with the orchestra playing "I Love You," she ran into Jimmy Keating.

"Nettie!" he exclaimed, grasping her arms to save her from falling. "Is a ghost after you, old girl?"

The tears were gone before she lifted her eyes. Self-control, before others, was her motto.

"Lo, Jimmy!" she answered brightly.

"Something the matter?" inquired the youthful Jimmy, his wide blue eyes anxiously scanning her face.

"Not a thing in the world," she smiled. "I was going out to wait for mother and Sherry in the car."

"I suppose you wouldn't want to dance awhile?" he ventured hopefully.

"Would I?" she electrified him by accepting. "Oh, Jimmy, I'd love to!"

"Hip, hip, hoorah!" Jimmy enthused. "I've been waiting for years to hear you say that—with all that enthusiasm! Honest I have, Nettie! Come on—let's go!"

Oh, well, she might as well! Why not? Life was over, anyhow. Why not dance and forget? Jimmy was a nice boy. True, in the past, he had been a pest with his declarations of undying devotion, but now that Sherry was gone—well, she might as well dance with Jimmy.

She let the ardent youth lead her to a table, and thence to the dance floor. It was nice to have some one fluttering around her, trying to please!

Oh, well—why not?

Mænad and Madonna

BY NICOLAS BRETON

YOU have risked your soul for my sake,
You shall not have risked it in vain,
O lovely body, that mystically gives me my soul again;
O a little longer lend it me, till I must give it back—
You who risked your soul for my sake—
And alone must follow the stern bright track
Where the heart must be strong or break.

You, the moon's wild silver—
And the moon in her stellar calm;
The pæon of Aphrodite—
And the Lord Christ's holy psalm;
Lorelei that sings in the streams,
And a sleeping child with its innocent dreams;
Sadder than spring with all her sorrow of flowers, yet gay
And madcap as she, on her doomed and dancing way;
Virgin still in the wildest kiss
That melts your limbs in flame,
Shameless as love's last gift—
Yet soft with the dew of shame.

Mænad and tender mother—
With a fairy tale for a brain,
Yet the wit and the ways of a woman born
To our human world, with its laughter worn
Like a wreath on the brows of pain.

O as I think of you, love,
My bones into water turn,
My heart shakes, and all of me
Is as dry grasses that burn;
I would cover you with kisses
As the sky is covered with stars,
Or as a lake is white
With a million nenuphars.
There is no meadow so thick
With king cup and daisy and clover
As the kisses that I would rain
On your body over and over.
O I would drain you, sweet,
As a jasmine is drained by bees,
And my heart the while, as a priest in a shrine,
Rapt in prayer, on his knees.

The Actor

THE STORY OF GENE LEONARD AND THE WIFE WHO LEFT HIM

By Donald McGibeny

THERE were three of us waiting in Gene's dressing room for the final curtain of "Piggly Wiggly"—Tommy Sayres, the little cockney comedian, who shared the room with Gene; Abe Goldman, the house manager; and myself. We were as nervous as if we were waiting our turn at the dentist's, for we faced the meanest job that can fall to the lot of any man.

Abe and I smoked like a couple of débutantes, while Tommy was unnecessarily long in taking off his make-up. He stopped in the middle of toweling his face, looked up at the ceiling, and listened. A roar of laughter came to us faintly from the audience. Then came the blare of the orchestra and the staccato patter of feet overhead, as the chorus trooped on.

"There's the finale," remarked Tommy.

"Yeah," agreed Abe, with a sigh. He dropped the stub of his cigar on the cement floor and stamped it out with his heel. "I don't see why you got to have me in on this thing!"

"You stay here!" I said to him, and got up from where I was sitting, to stretch my legs and walk off the weak, empty feeling that had suddenly developed in the pit of my stomach.

"But you don't need me," protested Abe. "I don't know him, hardly. He'll take it as an imposition."

"Shut up!" I snapped.

"You said Bill Brody would break it to him?" Sayres inquired, examining his face closely under the bright glare of the mirror lights.

"Yes—he'll join us just as soon as he's dressed."

We listened to the fast beat of the music and the rhythmic thud of the dancing. Then the chorus swung into the big song hit that had captured New York from the

opening night, eight months before, and had helped to make "Piggly Wiggly" the outstanding musical success of the season. We heard the thump of the curtain, followed by a moment of comparative quiet, and then by the clatter of feet as the chorus descended the iron stairs, laughing, chattering, and singing snatches of song.

We all jumped slightly as the door of the dressing room opened, but it was only Brody. His fat face was flushed and wet with perspiration.

"I'll be with you in a minute; but you'll have to take the job, Morrison. I can't tell him!"

"Come here!" I yelled.

"S-sh!" he hissed, and disappeared.

We heard Gene's voice—cheery, fun-loving—calling some complimentary remark to Eva Bovary, the ingénue. Then he came into the room. He seemed surprised to see us all sitting there, but not in the least suspicious.

"Hel-lo! What is it—a party?" he asked.

"You've guessed it," I said, my voice sounding high-pitched and queer. "Bill Brody will be in as soon as he gets his make-up off."

"Count me out!" Gene said, as he tugged himself out of the tight-fitting, idiotic soldier suit that he wore in the last act. "You know I'm a family man."

"Not to-night," I insisted.

"Every night."

"But it's Brody's birthday, Gene."

"Go on!" he laughed. "I've already attended three of his birthday parties this year."

We started to argue with him, while he cupped his hands with cold cream and smeared his face, apparently indifferent to our arguments. Suddenly he stopped and turned to me.

"All right! Go up and talk to May. If she'll go, I'll go."

I winced.

"No women," I said.

"Why not?"

"Brody's orders."

"Then that lets me out."

"But I've already seen May, and she told me to take you along."

"When did you see her?" he asked.

"Brody talked to her this afternoon."

"Oh, no, he didn't!" Gene laughed.

"She'd have said something about it at supper time."

We had no success until Brody joined us. It was he who won Gene over, for Gene loved Brody like a kid brother.

"All right! Go up and tell May, then," he finally said, "so I won't get in Dutch at home; and I want you to understand that I'm not going to stay out late."

Brody left, ostensibly to tell May, although we all knew that Gene's wife was on a train going West at that moment—and she was not traveling alone.

II

WE went to the Dutchman's, not far from the theater, where the thirsty can still take a chance with their eyesight. As we stood at the bar, we put Gene in the middle of us. Although we tried our best to act naturally, the conversation was forced. There were too many laughs at things that were not too funny. Gene ordered beer.

"No, you don't, Gene!" I said. "You're going to take a little shot like the rest of us."

"But I want beer."

"Nothing doing!" Big Bill gruffly commanded. "This round's on me, an' I'm payin' for no beer."

We choked down the stuff, and Gene dug in his pocket for money. Brody caught his arm.

"Put it away! I told you the round was on me."

"Now look here!" Gene said. "I don't want a party. You boys do. All right! Let me settle for this round, and then let me out. I tell you frankly, I don't get any pleasure out of drinking any more. You wait till you have a comfortable home to go to, instead of a hotel room, and you'll feel the way I do about it."

"Can that chatter and put your money away!" growled Brody.

"Five whiskies," I said to the bartender, "and make it snappy!"

Tommy Sayres whistled softly to himself. Abe puffed hard at his cigar. It may have been the smoke that brought tears to his eyes. Gene looked around at us and laughed.

"Oh, I know! It makes you all uncomfortable when a man talks that way, but there are darned few men who are more in love with their wives the second year than they were the first. You boys think you know a lot about women, but—"

"Drink up!" said Brody.

"Here's how!" I said.

"Kief-kief!" from Tommy.

"Over the river!" said Abe.

Gene drank. As he set his glass down, he tried to push past us.

"That's the last one," he said. "I'm going home."

We grabbed hold of him and kept him at the bar.

"Set 'em up again!" Abe ordered the barkeep.

"Now look here!" Gene expostulated, with just a trace of anger. "I want to go home—honestly I do. I'm tired. We played two shows to-day. Besides, May hasn't been feeling well for the past two or three days."

"You said you'd buy," Bill reminded him.

"Certainly I'll buy."

"Well, you can't buy without drinking with us. There's your glass!"

Gene glanced at the liquor with dislike, but picked up the glass.

"If you think you're going to get me lit—"

"Here's how!" I said.

"Down the hatch," from Abe.

"To crime!" Brody growled.

"Cheerio!" Tommy said.

"Now I'm going home!" Gene announced, as he set down his glass.

He reached in his pocket for his money, but Abe pulled at his arm.

"Nothing doing! I ordered this drink. You can pay for the next one."

"Damn it, there isn't going to be any next one!"

He made a dive to get away, but Brody grabbed him and held him, although the tussle was lively. Brody is built like a traffic cop.

"Behave!" he said, as he pushed Gene back against the bar.

There was a glitter in Gene's eye.

"I don't want to fight the four of you," he said. Then he leaned back against the bar and looked us over. "There's something funny going on here!"

None of us said a word, although it seemed the time had come for one of us to tell the truth.

"I knew there was something up when I came into the dressing room and found you there, Tommy. You're usually gone long before the end of the show."

Tommy sucked on his cigarette.

"Abe," continued Gene, "it's the first time you ever called on me."

Abe counted the change the bartender had passed him. Gene turned to me.

"And you, Morrison? Am I going to be fired? Is that it? Isn't the show going right? What is it?"

Brody tossed down his drink as if he had come to a sudden decision. With a smile on his face, he put down his glass and said:

"Wait a minute, boys! I want to tell you a story. Gather close!"

Gene turned around, with his back against the bar.

"It was a joke played on somebody we all know. You know him better than the rest of us, Gene. It may not seem funny at first, but wait till I've finished, and you'll get a laugh out of it."

"Is he playing in town?" Gene asked.

"Yes—one of the hits."

"Comedian?"

"Well, he's playing tragedy just at present."

Brody picked up his empty glass and stood looking at it for a moment.

"You don't mean the joke they played on Wesley Burton over at the Lamb's?" Gene asked.

"No—I know that yarn, but this is a different one. Let me tell it in my own way. I'll tell you all who it is afterward. First, let's have a little drink."

"I told you this was my last," Gene said. "Make your story snappy! I'm leaving in five minutes."

"All right, all right! I was just trying to remember how the thing starts. We'll call it 'The Actor, the Woman and the Friend'—comedy drama in two acts and a tableau, all rights reserved. This actor, contrary to the usual mine-run type, was a shy sort of bird. Never played around the women. Didn't hate 'em, but fought shy of 'em—especially any women in the com-

pany. Never got fresh with 'em. A good all-around egg."

"I know who you mean now," Gene said, with a laugh. "You mean Sid Olden, over at the court—and I think I've heard the story."

"I don't think you have," Brody said; "but let me tell it, anyway. Somehow this actor met a girl who had always wanted to go on the stage, fell hard for her, and married her—a regular little tramp, pretty as the dickens, but a bad one. She had the idea that by marrying this actor she was going to jump right in to playing leads. The fact was, she couldn't act for beans. It was only by his fighting the management all the time that he was able to get even small parts for her. He was so crazy about the woman he couldn't see that she wasn't a star. He thought it was just professional jealousy that was keeping her down. The girl, of course, thought she was good. They always do. She keeps nagging around about not having an opportunity, and finally hits on the funny idea that her husband—this actor—doesn't want her to have a chance, for fear she'll outshine him. She was jealous of her own husband—see?"

Gene smiled and nodded.

"I get the plot," he said.

"Sure! Well, this girl airs her idea around without getting much sympathy from anybody in the company, and then she takes it outside. She meets a friend she's known in her home town—a man friend—who listens to her story and tells her she's exactly right. Why, didn't he once see her act in the Elks' Benefit? She is so soothed and pleased by all this friend says to her, she feels she'd like to have more opportunities to talk to him; so first she introduces him to her husband, and then she makes her husband get him a job in the company. Now, here comes the comedy."

Gene, grinning, turned to me.

"Do you know who it is?"

"Wait a minute!" Brody said, pulling him back to the story by the coat lapel. "Don't interrupt until I'm clear through. If you do, you'll miss the best part. This boy turns out to be a pretty fair actor. He has nice ways, and makes quite a hit with the people of the company; but he makes the biggest hit of all with the actor husband. Since living expenses are so high, the husband, at the wife's suggestion, asks the friend to go out to dinner all the time,

and loans him money, and finally invites the boy to come and live in the same apartment with himself and his wife. He never dreams that the kid is repaying him by listening to the woman's jealous complaining, sympathizing with her, and finally making love to her.

"Well, things went from bad to the worst they could be. The actor's friends tried to put him wise, but they didn't dare say much, because he was so much in love with his wife. They could only hint at things, and this actor is such a square, innocent, clean-minded sort, he never suspected that they were trying to tell him about his own wife and the boy he had befriended. He was blind—absolutely blind to what was going on. Now, listen to this—the manager of the show thought he might break up the nasty mess by kicking the wife's friend out of the show; so he did it. Here's a laugh!"

Gene was still smiling, but it was a fixed, set smile. His eyes were beginning to catch sight of something unbelievably horrible.

"When the actor found his young friend had been fired, he went clear up in the air, and threatened to quit the show himself. The show couldn't go on without him, and it was one of the big New York hits; so they had to put the boy back in his part. You get the joke of the whole thing? Finally, the actor's friends couldn't stand it any longer. It was becoming the stock joke of New York. Everybody knew about it. His friends just had to tell him. Drink up, Gene!"

Gene didn't seem to hear.

"They went to the woman, and told her they were going to tell the actor. At first she denied everything, and then she admitted all. She begged them to give her a couple of days, and she would disappear with the friend and never, never come back—which was the very best thing that could happen. So, one night, she came to the theater as usual, but, after the first act, she and the friend took a train for the West. You see, *she was only in the first act*. Drink up, Gene—and laugh, for God's sake! I'm telling you a funny story!"

III

GENE was like a person hypnotized. He stared straight ahead of him at nothing. There was not a movement to show that

he had heard or understood, but his face was pinched, and had the color of dead flesh. Brody seemed frightened at what he had done.

"Do you want me to go on, Gene?"

A shudder ran through Gene's frame. His lips twitched, and there was a swallowing movement in his throat. Brody shook him slightly.

"Drink your drink, Gene!"

Gene's eyes narrowed as he looked at Brody.

"Who—did you say the actor was?" he muttered huskily.

"The joke's on you, Gene," said Brody, utterly wretched.

It happened so quickly that none of us were prepared for it. Full comprehension flooded into Gene's eyes. He threw his whisky glass in Brody's face, and the next instant he sprang at the big fellow, clawing and tearing, while from his throat came inarticulate cries that could only be likened to the gagging cawks of an infuriated deaf-mute.

Tommy, Abe, and I jumped to separate them, but we were not needed. Brody pinned Gene's arms to his sides in a bear hug that held him powerless.

"Gene!" he bawled. "Gene! Don't take it that way! It's the truth, Gene, so help me God! I didn't want to tell you, but I had to. You don't think it was easy, do you? Oh, Gene, don't take it that way!"

Gene struggled silently to break away, but Brody desperately held him.

"Stop it, Gene! Don't take it out on me! I'm the best friend you've got, and I'll stand by you till hell freezes over!"

Gene's only answer was to spit full in Brody's face. Tommy, Abe, and I all tried to interfere.

"Don't, Gene," I said. "Brody only told you what everybody knows."

"Stop it, Gene!" pleaded Brody. "Don't take it so hard, boy!"

"Let me go!" Gene gagged.

"No."

"I'm going to find May."

"She's gone."

"That's a dirty lie!"

"It's true, Gene," I said.

"Gene!" Brody cried. "You don't think we'd lie to you about a thing like this, do you? You just said May hasn't been the same the past two days. She brought a suit case to the theater yesterday

and to-day, didn't she? Didn't you notice Stanford wasn't in the chorus to-night? And she was only there for the first act. Didn't May ask you for a lot of money yesterday? It's true, Gene!"

Suddenly something snapped inside Gene, and he went as limp as a wet rag. His body was racked with hard, dry sobs, which came out with such difficulty that it hurt you to listen to them. Brody patted him on the back like a mother comforting her small boy.

"It's all right, boy! Some day you'll laugh about all this. Brace up, and we'll all have a little drink!"

A glass of whisky was forced on Gene, who choked most of it up again. We surrounded him, and turned the conversation to other matters until he had time to control himself and come to his senses. The moment finally arrived when, with a half crazy look in his eyes, he tried to say good night to us.

"Where are you going, Gene?" Brody inquired.

"Never mind!" Gene said dully. "I'll take care of the rest of this myself!"

"You're not going anywhere without me, Gene," Brody told him.

"Thanks, Bill, but I'll settle this alone."

"No, you won't, boy! They're a hundred miles away—and I've got your gun. You didn't think we were going to let you start any gun play, did you? They aren't worth it, and we need you too badly for the show."

Gene looked at Brody for a long minute.

"That was a dirty trick, sending them away where I couldn't get at them; but I'll find them—don't worry about that! And I can always get another gun."

"Yes, but you're not going to be that cheap, Gene. They aren't worth going to hell for, and that's exactly where you'll go if you try to get revenge. You'll be the one to suffer, Gene—you and the friends who love you!"

"Whatever I decide to do about this is my business."

"And mine, too, Gene," Brody said gently. "It's my job I'm thinking about. You go on a man hunt, and the show closes. Do you think I'm going to let those two cheat me out of one hundred and fifty a week? Not on your life! Tommy feels the same way about it. So do Abe, and Morrison, and the rest of the company."

He put his hand on Gene's shoulder.

"Think of your friends, Gene, if you won't think of yourself. It isn't often we all get an opportunity like this. We'll be two years in New York, Gene. If you don't need that two years' steady pay, I do. This show means all the difference between buying the little place in the country that I've always talked about and having to die in the harness, doing character bits, with an appeal to the Actors' Fund for my funeral expenses. No, Gene—you're going to act like a man. You're going to go on to-morrow night as if nothing had happened, and you're going to be funnier than you ever were before. Believe me, son, that will hurt them worse than anything you could do. They think you're going to chase after them. It's the only thing that keeps them going. It adds the only romance in the whole dirty business. If you really want revenge, leave them alone together. That's the worst thing you could do to them."

Gene stayed, but up to the time when we were forced to leave the bar we had no inkling as to what he really intended doing. He was silent, incased in an armor of brooding determination impossible to penetrate.

Tommy and Abe said good night at the door. Gene tried to include Brody and me in the general leave-taking.

"We're going with you, Gene," Brody announced.

"Why?"

"Oh, the walk will do us good. Come on, boy!"

With perceptible bad grace, Gene gave in. We walked up Seventh Avenue in the warm, slightly moist air of early morning, saying little. When we reached Gene's apartment on Fifty-Seventh Street, he tried once more to get rid of us.

"We'll go upstairs with you, Gene," Brody said.

"I don't want you!" Gene burst out. "I want to be alone!"

"I know—but we're coming, anyway."

Gene knew Brody. After a second's silence, he turned and led us into the apartment. The ordeal he faced was a bitter one—to go into the rooms that he had so lovingly called "home." He had difficulty in finding the keyhole, and hesitated before opening the door.

When he switched on the pink-shaded lights, there were signs that May had been there before going to the station. Wisps

of tissue paper lay on the floor. On the lounge was a discarded hat. A note, scrawled in pencil, lay on the table. Gene picked it up, read it carefully, then crumpled it up and stuck it into his pocket, keeping his back to us.

"Got any cigars, Gene?" Bill asked, trying to dissolve the tragic pathos that hung in the air.

Gene didn't answer. He picked up a bedroom slipper. Its foolish red pompom hung by a thread. When he turned, his lips were trembling, and the tears were running down his cheeks.

"Won't you go away—for God's sake—you two?" he sobbed.

"No, we won't," Brody announced flatly. "We're going to stay right here until morning. Drop that damned thing, and quit acting like a sentimental idiot!" He tossed his hat on the table and began to gather up the tissue paper from the floor. "Open up all the windows, Morrison, and turn on that electric fan, so as to get the sickish smell out of this room!" he ordered. "Gene, come over to the delicatessen with me, and we'll get some food. I'm hungry. Morrison, by the time we get back, I expect you to have this place cleaned up."

He forced Gene to work—made him cook eggs and bacon and help eat them; made him wash dishes; made him sweep up; never gave him a moment to brood. Every time Gene threatened to break down—and the occasions were frequent—Brody made fun of him until Gene would lose his temper.

One such occasion came when we were going to bed. Brody wanted him to keep out of the scented boudoir that contained the twin beds he and May had occupied.

"Sleep in that room across the hall—or on the lounge."

"I'm going to sleep in my own bed," Gene announced.

"Then I sleep in the other one."

"Don't you dare sleep in that bed!" Gene suddenly blazed. "Don't think you can do everything you damn please around here. I'm getting pretty sick of—"

"Gene!" Brody broke in. "We're only trying to help you over the hard part, old son."

Gene turned away sulkily.

"Oh, I know—but, just the same, don't go too far!"

We left him alone after that. Brody

slept in the room across the hall, while I slept on the sofa in the front room.

Although I felt physically and mentally exhausted, I had trouble in going to sleep. You know how it is when you're too tired?

I was just feeling that divine lassitude which means that slumber is not far off when I heard a door creak. The next moment I heard Brody call:

"What are you looking for, Gene?"

There was no answer. Then Brody said:

"Go on back to bed, Gene! I told you I had your gun; and I've got your razor and the carbolic acid out of the bathroom. I've even got the scissors. You're not going to commit suicide. We need you too badly for the show!"

IV

WE thought we had been awfully clever. Gene went on the next night, and played with more fun and gusto than ever before, adding new business that had even the chorus convulsed. He went right on playing, too, as if he was his old self. We thought the trouble was over, and gave ourselves a lot of credit.

Then, one night, he went on at his usual cue and couldn't remember a line of his part. He stood there in the middle of the stage, as if paralyzed, and finally motioned for the curtain to be lowered. It was the beginning of a nervous breakdown that nearly killed him.

He didn't play again for more than two years. Then he got the lead in "The Whirligig," and made a bigger hit than ever before. He was a scream—a riot. I saw the show soon after the opening, and predicted that it would run two seasons in New York.

It stayed there that long, but Gene didn't stay with it. He asked—asked, mind you!—to be changed to the road company. Think of an actor asking to be taken off Broadway! You see, he had heard that May was back in New York—he had never divorced her—and he was terror-stricken that he would run into her, or that she would try to see him.

Finally the management gave in and put him with the company they were sending to Boston and Philadelphia. Brody was with that company. He told me the rest of the story.

They had been playing Philly for two months. One rainy night, Gene and Brody

were just about to enter the theater when a woman stepped out of the shadows and took hold of Gene's arm. It was May. Philadelphia was her home town. Gene froze solid when he recognized who it was.

"I want to talk to you, Gene," she said.

Gene shook his head.

"I don't want to talk to you," he told her.

"You don't blame him, do you?" Brody put in.

"Just a minute, Gene!" May pleaded. "It's not for me—it's mother. She's sick."

Gene had always been devoted to Mrs. Moore, May's mother—a frail, futile, gray-haired little woman, too sweet-natured to control her own children. He also noticed that May had no umbrella.

"Come inside!" he said gruffly.

"It's a stall," Brody muttered.

"Never mind! Leave us alone, Bill!" Gene said.

"Don't let her make a sucker out of you!"

"Don't worry!"

He led May upon the darkened stage.

"Now, what do you want?" he asked.

"I'll give you five minutes."

"That's not enough—and we can't talk here very well," replied May.

"It's either here or nowhere—and this is the last time."

"Oh, Gene!"

She tried to put her hands on him, but he backed away and said sharply:

"Don't do that! It won't do you any good. You killed every bit of love and respect I ever had for you three years ago—and damned near killed me in the bargain. That's all over—finished—done! Get me?"

"Why didn't you stop me, Gene? Why didn't you beat me—kill me—anything? You were too good to me!"

"I'm not here to talk about you or myself or the past. What about your mother?"

"Take me into your dressing room, Gene, while you're putting on your make-up. Let me sit down. I'm tired. I have to stand on my feet all day at the store."

Gene winced.

"He's left you, has he?"

"Of course—three months after we ran away. It was just infatuation, Gene. I never really loved him. I was nothing but a silly little fool. If I'd only known then what I know now!"

"It's too late to talk about that. I want to hear about your mother."

"She—she's sick, Gene."

"What's the matter with her?"

"Well, a lot of things. You know she was never strong, and she's been trying to run a boarding house. The work's too hard for her. It's just killing her."

Gene started to take out his pocketbook, but, before he could open it, May pressed it back.

"No, Gene—not money. That's not what I came for."

"What is it, then?"

"She wants to talk to you. Won't you go out and see her?"

Gene thought for a moment, then shook his head.

"No! She'd want to try to get us back together, and there's not a chance, May—not a possibility."

"But she doesn't know what happened, Gene," May said. "I never dared tell her. She thinks we're just separated because of a quarrel."

"Then it's about time you told her the real truth," Gene returned bitterly. "I always loved your mother, and I want her to think well of me. You might tell her whose fault it was."

"But it was partly your fault, Gene!"

Gene suddenly went red-eyed.

"My fault? After giving you the finest love a man ever gave a woman, and everything else you wanted, to find I'd become the laughing stock of Broadway—tricked—cheated—"

"I said it was partly your fault, Gene. You were too good to me. I wasn't used to being treated like that; and you were the one who invited him to live with us. When he began making love to me, I treated it more or less as a joke—"

Gene laughed harshly.

"What a great little joke that was!"

"Oh, Gene, won't you understand?" begged May.

"Sure I understand. I understand everything, and I tell you again that I'm through—absolutely through!"

May's shoulders drooped discouragement. She dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief.

"Will you do just one little thing for me?"

"What?"

"If you won't go and see my mother, will you let us come and see you?"

"No! You wouldn't gain anything by it, May."

"I don't mean to talk to you. I mean to come to the show. Mother wants to see you act, Gene—and so do I. We haven't any money to buy seats. Won't you get us a couple right down in front? They say you're just wonderful. I heard the girls talking at the store. I always said you were the greatest comedian in the business."

The interview was getting painfully long. The stage was lighted, and the woman's presence was being remarked by other members of the company.

"All right—I'll leave a couple of seats at the box office for to-morrow night. Now I have to dress."

He left abruptly, ignoring the lips she held up for him to kiss. Brody was waiting for him in his dressing room.

"What did she want—money?"

"No—just tickets to the show for herself and her mother."

"That's the bunk!" Brody said scornfully. "Look out for her, Gene! She's going to try to stage a come-back."

"There's not a chance in the world, Bill," replied Gene, taking off his coat. "What kind of a person do you think I am, anyhow? I tell you I'm cured—absolutely!"

His tone was convincing; and yet, that night, he played listlessly, as if he had no interest in his part. Just before the first curtain he missed a cue entirely.

Brody, as soon as he had made his change for the second act, went to visit Gene, and found him sitting in his dressing room gazing into vacancy.

"Snap out of it, Gene! You're not putting over one of your lines to-night!"

"I know it," Gene answered thoughtfully; "but you can't get over a meeting like that in five minutes." He was silent for a moment. "Did you notice," he went on, "that she didn't have any umbrella? And that coat she was wearing was one she bought just before she left me. Think of May wearing that coat, and working in a store, and her mother keeping a boarding house!"

"Honest to the Lord," Brody sneered, "I believe you're going to take her back!" Gene's eyes hardened.

"No, I'm not, Bill; but, just the same, it's pretty tough to pay all your life for a mistake like that."

"I wish I could believe it, but I wouldn't bet a thin dime," Brody said—and slammed the door as he went out.

V

THE next night Gene gave a sparkling performance—and he knew why. He was in the midst of taking off his make-up when a rap came at the door.

"What is it?"

"A couple ladies to see you, Mr. Leonard."

Gene heard laughing comments from actors and actresses in the other dressing rooms.

"I'm glad they're ladies, Gene; but I'm jealous, just the same," Josephine Davis called from across the way.

"Oh, Mr. Leonard, won't you take me along?" came from Bob Knight, the juvenile, next door.

Since May left him, Gene had returned to his marked shyness in the matter of women. He frowned into the mirror, then replied:

"Tell them to wait. I'll be dressed in a few minutes."

He dressed slowly, to give the company a chance to leave the theater, as well as to make up his mind what he was going to do. Some one else knocked.

"Come in!" he yelled, thinking that it was Brody.

It was May. She walked in and closed the door.

"I told you to wait out there," Gene reminded her.

"I know, but I was afraid you might change your mind. Mother's with me, Gene, and she wants to see you. Please!" She gave him no opportunity to speak. "I won't bother you again, but please pretend that you care for me a little bit to-night. She doesn't understand. You were so fine, and the show was so good, it's cheered her up wonderfully. She wants to see you. It isn't very much to ask—just to take us out for a little bite to eat?"

Gene was undecided, and May continued in a forced whisper:

"It's only for an hour or so, Gene—and after three years! She won't understand if you don't come. She doesn't have much pleasure, Gene. You might give her just this one evening!"

"Ready, Gene?" Bill Brody's voice came to them from outside.

Gene didn't answer.

"Please, Gene!" begged May. "It's all I ask."

Brody walked in. When he saw May he stopped.

"Oh! You're here again, are you?"

"Cut it, Bill!" Gene said sharply.

Brody stared at Gene for a moment, and then his mouth twisted into a wry smile.

"So that's it, is it?"

He turned without a word, and walked out. May smiled at Gene—a worried, grateful, misty smile.

"You'll come?"

"Yes," Gene grated, frowning fiercely, as he jerked his necktie into place; "but I want you to understand, May—"

"Oh, I know," May interrupted him. "It's just for to-night; but please, Gene, pretend you still care for me a little, before mother."

Mrs. Moore smiled when she saw them come upstairs together—a smile that said:

"I knew things would turn out all right!"

At first conversation was difficult, but when they were seated in a café, with food before them, the tension lessened. May and Mrs. Moore chattered about the show, repeating jokes, and praising Gene. Gene was extremely polite, but quietly thoughtful, and slightly frowning.

He was puzzled. May's furs were shabby—the ones he had given her—her hat was certainly not new, and there was a small rip in one of her gloves; yet the waiter had recognized her when they came in, and it was an expensive café. There were other things that made Gene suspicious. If May was working in a store in Philadelphia, how was it that she had been in New York?

He forced himself to take part in the conversation. He told of various happenings in the company, and even attempted a joke or two, while all the time he studied May. To look at her hurt him. Her clear, fresh beauty, her white, even teeth, her perfect skin, the mold of her throat, were things that sucked at his heart with desire.

She excused herself for a moment, and it seemed to Gene that a look passed between the two women. Gene followed her with his eyes as she made her way across the café. Suddenly he felt as if his stomach were attacked by a cramp. A man rose from a table and started to speak to May. She passed him without a glance, and he yelled something after her. Per-

haps it was just some one getting fresh, but—

"Gene"—Mrs. Moore reached for his hand—"I don't know what the trouble's all about, for May wouldn't tell me; but it can't be as serious as you're making it. I know May—and she loves you, Gene!"

"I get the plot," Gene broke out; "but don't say another word!" Noting the alarm in Mrs. Moore's eyes, he went on more quietly: "Please, Mother Moore—as you say yourself, you don't know anything about it."

"Tell me, Gene!"

"Ask May."

"Was it another man?"

Gene remained silent.

"Because, if it was, I know it didn't mean anything, Gene. May's a full-blooded girl, and needs a lot of attention; but she's always been in love with you, Gene. Many's the night she's lain awake crying for you. We all make mistakes, Gene—you know that."

"Let's not talk about it," Gene said quietly. "Tell me about yourself. May said you were taking boarders."

"It's an awful come-down!" Mrs. Moore sighed. "I always thought I could get a good rest once the children were settled, but it seems they just can't get along without me. Frank seems to have an awfully hard time finding a job that will pay him anywhere near what he's worth; and of course Robert's only just out of school."

"Three years, isn't it?" Gene asked.

"Yes, but he's nothing but a boy yet. He says he doesn't want to make the mistake Frank made. He wants to be real sure what he wants to do before he gets started. I think that's right. He's a good worker, and the handiest ever around the house. There just isn't anything he can't fix."

"How about yourself, Mother Moore? Are you making money?"

"Well, no—not much, that is. Things are so high nowadays, and I've had to use up most of the money Mr. Moore left in repairing the house; but I'll manage. May's the only one I'm really worried about. Gene, she needs you. She's just like a lost dove without her mate since you and she quarreled."

"It wasn't just a quarrel," Gene said. "It was something that can't be patched up; so let's not talk about it!"

His tone was so final that Mrs. Moore released his hand.

When May came back to the table, she looked at her mother with questioning eyes. Mrs. Moore shook her head, while Gene was occupied in lighting a cigarette.

It was pouring when they left the café. Not much was said in the taxicab that took them home, although May made several attempts to force a conversation. They stopped, at last, in front of a brick dwelling undistinguishable from its drab line of neighbors.

"You go on in, mother," May said. "I want to talk to Gene for a minute."

As soon as Mrs. Moore said good night, the younger woman drew close to Gene. The perfume that reached his nostrils brought vividly to his mind the night, three years before, when he had opened the door of his empty apartment. He felt a strange tingling go through his body.

"There's no use in talking to me, May," he said.

"I know, Gene. You've been a darling to-night, and I hate—I just hate to have it end! Won't you drive around a little, so we can talk?"

"No."

"Gene," May pleaded, slipping her arm through his, "you promised this evening to me, and it's not over. Think, Gene! It's three years I've been hoping and waiting for an evening like this. If you only knew what a good wife I'd be to you, Gene! If you'd only forgive and forget!"

Gene made a movement as if to get out of the cab.

"If you start that—"

"I won't, Gene. Don't go! I won't say another word. Only drive around the block—just that, Gene! It's not much to ask after three years."

As Gene made no move, she gave the order to the chauffeur and slammed the door.

"Gene"—she leaned toward him—"I've played square, Gene—"

"Square!" he mocked.

"I mean since then. There have been plenty of men who wanted to be good to me, but I knew that everything wasn't finished between us—"

"Who was the man who spoke to you to-night?"

"What man?"

"In the café—when you left the table."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Her tone expressed perfect incredulity.

"Where are you working?" Gene blurted out.

"Wanamaker's."

"How long have you been there?"

"About—four months."

"You were in New York three months ago. That's why I left."

"I know—and that's why I came back to Philadelphia. I tried to see you in New York."

"It wouldn't have done you any good," Gene said. "I wouldn't have seen you. I was through then—just as I'm through now."

"That's not so, Gene!" May burst out, clutching at his knee. "If you're through, why haven't you ever divorced me?"

"Because—"

"Because you still love me, just as I love you! Because we were made for each other, Gene, even if I did make a mistake in my life! I was jealous of you, Gene. I thought that you were trying to keep me down—that you didn't want me to have a chance to show what I could do."

Gene laughed mirthlessly.

"Oh, I know!" May went on. "I can laugh about it, too, now; but I thought it was the truth then, and he agreed with me, and filled my head full of crazy ideas about what a star I'd be with him. Oh, can't you understand. Gene? Aren't you a big enough man to forgive and forget? All I want to do is darn your socks, Gene. That's all I ask—just a little home where I can cook your meals, and darn your socks, and wait for you to come from the theater. Remember what good Welsh rare-bit I used to make, after the show? Remember what fun we used to have when we brought up the gang for supper in our apartment?" She stopped suddenly, and the clutch on his knee relaxed. "Gene—there isn't some one else, is there?"

"Why shouldn't there be?" Gene grated out. "You certainly didn't expect me to be faithful to a memory, after you—"

"So—that's it!" May said in a choked voice.

They sat there in silence, while the rain drummed on the top of the cab. Suddenly May began to cry.

"I—I knew that was it! I felt it. You couldn't have changed so. You couldn't have treated me so—so coldly, as if you never really loved me. But, Gene, I don't see how you—you could! I've always thought, if I played square—" She sud-

denly flung out her hands. "Oh, what's the use!"

She tried to control her tears. She dabbed at her eyes and blew her nose. Finally she said:

"Who is it, Gene?"

Gene sat silent, feeling as if a boil were growing on his lungs.

"An actress?" she insisted. "It must be an actress."

"No," Gene spoke out of the darkness. "There's no one. I've often wished there was." He spoke slowly, as if groping his way. "You were right when you said I loved you. I always have, and I guess I always will. There's something about you that I can't find anywhere else—something that pulls me all to pieces inside. I guess you were right, too, when you said it was partly my fault. I suppose I should have seen what was going on long before the crisis came. I was blind—but then, you see, I trusted you."

May grabbed hold of his hand and squeezed it.

"Don't Gene—don't! You're just torturing me."

She began to cry again. Gene slipped his arm around her and gently patted her shoulder.

"There—there, sweetie! Don't you keep on crying! That makes me feel awful bad, too. We both made a big mistake, I guess."

"Gene, kiss me!" May begged.

For a long instant they both forgot everything as their lips met. In the front seat, the chauffeur lit a cigarette. The flash of light caused them to break apart. May sat up and fumbled at her hair. She looked out at the raindrops dancing under a near-by arc light.

"Gene, it's exactly like the night we first met—remember?"

She gave a sigh and snuggled close, like a satisfied kitten. Her arm stole around Gene's neck.

"Are you coming in?" she asked softly.

"No, May—not to-night. I'll go back to the hotel; but I'll be here early in the morning."

"But—why?"

"Well, let me have my way about this. Listen—you stay in bed until ten o'clock to-morrow. I'll be around for you about eleven. We're going shopping. I noticed the gloves and the hat and the furs, to-night, honey; and though they looked fine

on you, it seems to me you need some new things."

"But—my job, Gene!"

"Oh, I guess you can give that up. You won't need it any more," replied Gene.

VI

PROBABLY you will blame Gene for giving in to her, but you must remember that he had been in love with that girl from the first moment he ever met her. Perhaps you would have done differently.

It was nearer ten o'clock than eleven when he called for her, and he had to wait downstairs amid a smell of stale cabbage and general moldiness until May made her appearance. She was a different May than he had seen the night before. On her head was a becoming toque that was most decidedly new. Her suit was smart. Her feet were shod in suede slippers that looked as if they had just come out of the box. Her ankles were clad in sheerest gauze. Only the furs that draped her shoulders belonged to the costume of the previous night.

It rather spoiled Gene's original idea to have such a well groomed woman with him on his shopping expedition, but he went right ahead with his plan. He bought like an oil millionaire—furs, dresses, gowns, wraps, gloves, hosiery, shoes, hats—everything that May looked at Gene bought.

"Don't you think you're spending too much money on me, Gene?" she would inquire periodically.

"Leave that to me, honey," Gene would laugh. "You didn't marry a poor man!"

When they had finished luncheon, and there was nothing else that May could think of that she needed, Gene took her hands in his.

"Come over to the bank, honey. I sent a message to New York that ought to have an answer by this time. I've a little surprise for you."

They went to an important institution that May was almost frightened to enter. Gene was gone for quite a long time, while she sat there and tapped nervously with one foot, planning for the future. At last he rejoined her.

"Goodness, you were a long time!" she said.

"I know, dear," Gene smiled, "but this was important." He placed a bank book in her hand. "I have put two thousand dollars on deposit here in your mother's

name. She'll have to come in and give them her signature—but of course that can be done any time."

"Oh, Gene, that was mighty sweet of you!" May exclaimed.

"Well, she said that things weren't going very well, and I wanted to do something for her. Also, I told them to send your monthly check to your mother's address."

"My monthly check?"

"Yes—you won't have to work in a store. I just hated that!" He took off his hat and held out his hand. "And now—good-by, May!"

"But"—she drew away from him—"but aren't you going to come back to me, Gene?"

"Why, May, I told you all along that I was finished."

The Destroying Angel

THE STRANGE SITUATION THAT TRENHOLM MIDDLETON HAD TO FACE WHEN HE CAME TO CLAIM HIS BETROTHED

By Margaret Busbee Shipp

"TALK about the Chinese being ancestor worshipers, we can beat them at their own game in South Carolina! I tell you that I'm going to marry the sweetest girl in the wide world, and you ask me if I know anything about her family or why she left college! I'm not blaming you, mother—it's the fault of your generation, with its polite habit of tucking evil out of sight. Passing by so many skeletons in closets, I suppose it became the custom to sniff suspiciously even in the open air!"

Mrs. Middleton's equanimity remained absolutely undisturbed. Trenholm was the youngest of her children, and she was accustomed to the fire of the South Carolina temperament.

"You have become engaged to Virginia on three weeks' acquaintance," she returned mildly. "That doesn't surprise me, knowing your ardent way of going after what you want. I merely suggested that it seemed strange for Virginia to leave college in the middle of the term, when she would have graduated in June, without telling her closest friends the reason for her departure. Naturally, there was a rumor that she had been expelled. I heard Nelly Ravenal say that Virginia had invited several girls to a house party, and wrote regretting that she

had to cancel the invitation, but giving no explanation. My common sense tells me that there is some cause for all this. I wish I understood it!"

Not knowing how to explain it himself, her son answered a shade loftily:

"Where there is implicit confidence, nosing around to find the reason for any action is entirely unnecessary. If Jinty did it, it's quite all right. She's four inches too short for such an up-stage name as Virginia! Why, mother, when I asked her to marry me, I didn't even know whether her name was Lisle or Lyle."

"But your wife will bear your name, which, happily, is an established one." Then Mrs. Middleton added, rather hesitatingly: "Her means? It's wonderful for you to be an associate professor at your age, but the university does pay such small salaries!"

"As to that"—Trenholm was magnificent in his casualness and his sincerity—"I don't even know whether I'm to support her mother or not. She said something about her mother being dependent on her, but as we became engaged only the last night of her visit, there were so many more important things to talk about! I much prefer to have my wife bring me just herself."

The very words his father had used to her in their own springtime! Mrs. Middleton's eyes grew tender. What a divine wisdom of its own youth had! Even if one wasn't discreet, or experienced, or poised, one was *young*—and that was far better!

"I'm wrong to have these apprehensions," she conceded. "I know you'll have a beautiful visit to Bald Rock. Give Jinty my love, baby mine!"

He grinned indulgently at the term of endearment, because he was six feet tall, wore shell-rimmed glasses, and was positive that he looked every hour of thirty, instead of his actual twenty-three.

At the station he was afraid he had borne too harshly on his mother's generation, so he sent an ornate box of candy as a peace offering.

His mother saw the messenger boy entering the gate and felt misgivings.

"Oh, dear, that means Tren has sent me another present! He has so little money, and he's all impulse and generosity! Everybody says he's exactly like Uncle Durant, and I wish he wasn't!"

Her thoughts dwelt somberly on the long ago duel, chivalrous but wholly mistaken, which had cost the life of the boy who fired in the air.

II

It was not a long journey to Bald Rock, a settlement where Charlestonians have had summer homes since the old days when it was imperative to leave the rice plantations for the mountains. It was one of these estates, with many acres in virgin forest, which Mr. Malcolm—Jinty's stepfather—had purchased some years before.

Trenholm had dined on the train, so Jinty and himself had a magical evening all to themselves—a night of moonlight and enchantment.

He had not finished with the subject of implicit faith, and he found it easy to express his ideas eloquently when a leaf-brown head was cuddled against his shoulder, and eyes as blue as larkspur were lifted to his own. Jinty agreed with him that the whole secret of enduring love was absolute trust, entire confidence, and perfect freedom. It was amazing that so many marriages came a cropper when the way was so plain!

There was only one note of discord in the whole rapturous evening, and that was due to Mrs. Malcolm. She left them to-

gether, except for a few minutes; but in that time she sent Jinty for a photograph, and took the opportunity to whisper hurriedly to Trenholm:

"Please don't ask Jinty to be married at any time soon. I'll talk to you about it tomorrow. I don't want to spoil your first evening."

As if that might not have been enough to cast a damper on any one's spirits! Oh, mothers, mothers! Spoil-sports all, poor dears!

He turned on his pillow and was asleep.

His next impression was the inviting odor of the cantaloupe on his breakfast tray. Shower and dressing occupied the least possible amount of time, and he was downstairs, looking for Jinty. As she had not yet emerged, he went outdoors, where a beckoning side path lured him into the woods.

There, on a stump, was a gorgeous mushroom, brilliant sulphur in color, with shelving, overlapping caps five or six inches broad—the edible *polyporus sulphureus*. He detached it carefully to take to Jinty; but it was later that his own enthusiasm was kindled, and by a most insignificant mushroom with a brownish gray cap, dingy gills, and acrid milk, which he exulted to recognize as a rare variety reported in America only from Vermont and western Carolina.

It was the first time he had been in that section of the Blue Ridge, so rich in fungi, and the season had been a rainy one. The minutes fled on enchanted wings. The older passion had reasserted itself. He was no longer the impatient lover—he was the absorbed young botanist.

But it was an amazed little girl whom he found on his return.

"Where have you been all this time? What in the world have you got there, Tren? Toadstools?"

The last word, in a tone of disgust, was especially directed at the large sulphur-colored one.

"Dearest," he began, "I've brought you a corking specimen of a delicious mushroom. You might have it for lunch, if you like."

"For lunch?" repeated Jinty. "Eat that? Why, Tren, it's the very most repulsive-looking object I ever saw!"

The lover triumphed over the naturalist. He tossed his find away. It really was a magnificent gesture, if Jinty had but

known. Unfortunately she pressed her advantage a little too far.

"Do throw away the others, too!" she coaxed; and then she, the peerless one, added the platitudinous words that he wouldn't have believed possible from the beloved lips. "How can you tell the difference between a toadstool and a mushroom?" she asked.

His tone was crisp as he replied—and now the botanist had triumphed over the lover:

"My dear girl, I suppose that 'toadstool' is used erroneously oftener than any word in the English language. I brought a few specimens of edible and poisonous mushrooms to show you, because I thought you would be interested. These, which I have isolated on this piece of bark, are poisonous varieties. The sulphur-colored *polyporus* that I threw away is as harmless as a cabbage, but tastes a lot better. This white one is called the destroying angel. With its fragile ring and hidden death cup, it's the most delicately lovely mushroom in the forest, and the man-killing tiger is less deadly. There's a chance of escape from the tiger, but not a chance for the poor fellow who has eaten a deadly *amanita*. Even the breathing in of the spores affects some people unpleasantly."

Jinty shuddered and drew back.

"Now look at these twins. It's a queer practical joke of nature's that an edible specimen sometimes has its poisonous twin. The juice of this fly mushroom attracts flies as dope does a Chinaman, and I've often seen a ring of dead flies under the shadow of its cap. It's the one which caused the death of Count de'Vecchi, because even the expert sometimes mixes it up with its twin, *Cæsar's* mushroom, which old epicures used to call 'the food of the gods.' It was the last meal of the Emperor Claudius."

He broke off, dropping the classroom manner that he had unconsciously assumed, and said irritably:

"Just why are you looking at me like that, Jinty? Your mouth is wide open. One would think I was showing you a live rattlesnake!"

"His last meal?" echoed Jinty, trying to appear brave by touching *Cæsar's* agaric with her forefinger. "If it's perfectly harmless, why did it kill him?"

"I was just about to explain that his wife, Agrippina, seasoned the dish with a

tasty dash of poison. Now the mushrooms in this pile are the blushers. See how the trail of even a tiny insect has made a mark like a blush! Did you ever see a more exquisite color than this *lactarius indigo*? Look how the blue shines through the thin surface, as if under a silvery veil!"

"Tren," she said solemnly, "it's dripping with deep blue juice. I can't let you eat such an awful, unnatural thing—I simply cannot!"

"I didn't intend to eat it. Its especial quality happens to be its beauty."

The larkspur eyes lifted to his were a still lovelier blue, and he relented.

"We're almost quarreling, sweetheart! Don't you ever ask that toadstool-mushroom question again, nor tell the joke first bandied between Ham and Japhet that the way to tell the difference is to eat it, and, if you don't die, it's a mushroom. I bet the first amphibious animal was a good sport who jumped overboard and took a chance rather than hear that joke again. We'll have the blushers for luncheon, just to prove to you that they are edible, and the next time you won't be afraid. You know that a mushroom expert is a mycologist, and a mushroom eater is a mycophagist? It's curious," he went on thoughtfully, "that in my classes a girl becomes interested in mushrooms by learning a few edible varieties. 'Can you eat it?' is invariably her first question, but I've never had a male student ask it. I must go and wash my hands, dear. I've been grubbing in the moist earth to get the complete specimens to show you."

"And I was simply horrid about them!" Jinty reproached herself. "Hurry back, Tren!"

III

Two circumstances occurred to delay Trenholm Middleton.

On returning to his room, he remembered that he had left a fifty-dollar bill in his bill-holder. The leather bill-holder was still on his dressing table, but the money was gone. Either the respectable old colored butler who had brought his breakfast, or the maid who had cleaned up the room, must be the thief; but how abominably embarrassing to have to explain it to his host, because he would have to borrow the money to buy his ticket home!

Feeling decidedly less jaunty, he started to go downstairs again, when a door on the

hall opened, and an elderly man stood at the threshold.

"Will you come into my library for a moment? I am Mr. Malcolm."

A grave sadness, an impressive dignity, stamped the man—tall, emaciated, and silver-haired.

"I am delighted to meet you, sir," replied Trenholm. "I had hoped for the pleasure this morning. You know why I'm here, Mr. Malcolm." There was something boyishly appealing about the young man as he stammered: "I don't know how a chap gets up the n-erve to ask a man to let him marry his daughter—especially when it's Jinty. You'll have to h-help me out, sir!"

Mr. Malcolm bowed an acknowledgment with reservations. He rang, and a trained nurse appeared from the adjoining room.

"Miss Dorr, you will find Virginia somewhere downstairs."

As Miss Dorr left the room, she glanced at Trenholm with an expression which he found inscrutable.

When the two men were alone, Mr. Malcolm said in a voice all the more impressive because the clear intonations lacked any emphasis:

"You and I must plunge into a sea of trouble. There's nothing to be gained by hesitating on the brink." He opened a drawer of his desk, took out a fifty-dollar bill, and handed it to Trenholm. "This is yours?"

It was a statement rather than a question. Trenholm took the bill with no small relief.

"Yes, thank you immensely," he said. "Did I drop it somewhere?"

There was an ominous silence. The older man's face was so pitying that the younger one suddenly felt cold—curiously, clammy cold.

"I give Virginia everything a father can give to an adored daughter. Therefore it is not from any withholding on my part that she rifled your drawer in your absence. It is a habit against which she is as powerless as the tide is powerless to keep stationary. You will have to face the fact—Virginia is a kleptomaniac."

Trenholm sprang to his feet.

"It's a lie!" he shouted. "It's a filthy lie made in hell!"

He hardly knew what he said. He only knew that he had to push away from him the monstrous, hideous accusation which

seemed to be smothering his youth like the fall of a black pall.

There was a silence, freighted with misery. Mr. Malcolm's voice had a metallic ring when he spoke again.

"I wish you might have accepted my statement without forcing a father to bring proof against his child—for, in everything except birth, Virginia is indeed my child; but, alas, there is the inheritance from her father, himself a defaulting cashier. The baby was born ill starved. As a tiny thing, she had a quaint magpie way of finding bright objects and hiding them—her mother's ring, her nurse's brass thimble. We thought it amusing—God forgive us! It was two years later when her nurse first put fear into our hearts by saying, 'Ain't it funny Jinty doan' nebbah hide away her own jimcracks, allus othah folk's things?' We have called in specialists, we have tried hypnotic therapeutics, but it has all proved unavailing. I keep a trained nurse to safeguard her as far as possible, but my poor child cannot always be watched."

Suddenly his mother's misgivings came to the tortured boy. It was as if her lips asked mechanically:

"Why did she leave college?"

Mr. Malcolm answered the question with visible reluctance:

"You touch a painful subject, but it is your right to know. In the present phase of the disease Virginia takes only money. The president of the college found out that she had pilfered quite a sum, and refused to keep her. I thought it a cruel decision, for of course I immediately made the amount good. It is a comfort to me that you love my little girl. I am growing to be an old man, and the burden of responsibility has grown heavier than I can bear. You will find it imperative to keep a nurse, and I suggest Miss Dorr, because she is accustomed to the duty. Virginia must never be left alone with other people's property; nor must you blame her. She is the innocent victim of an evil inheritance."

Miss Dorr knocked at the door and entered the room.

"Miss Lisle wishes to speak to Mr. Middleton," she said.

The older man held out his hand.

"Go—and take my blessing with you," he said unsteadily.

Trenholm reeled out of the room into a blackened world.

His little Jinty—his flowerlike sweet-

heart, under the shadow of that relentless curse—his own Jinty!

IV

At the foot of the stairs he met her mother. Mrs. Malcolm's face was pale and troubled.

"I am so grieved that you had to learn our—our sorrow in this abrupt way! I meant to forewarn you." The tears rolled down her cheeks. "It is breaking my heart!"

He pressed her hand hard, and turned away. He, to whom words had always come in a torrent, was stunned into dumbness. All his maimed life seemed to be uniting in one inarticulate cry:

"I cannot marry her!"

It was as if there crowded about him the shadowy presences of the generations he had joked about—the long, fine line of upright men and high-minded women; as if for the first time he realized that their standard of noblesse was the bedrock of his whole conscious thought.

Though he loved Jinty with all the torrential force of young love, he could not marry a thief. He tried to drown the word with "kleptomaniac," but the shorter, uglier name hammered against his brain. Nor was it possible for him, with his modest salary, to command the services of a trained nurse from year to year—a caretaker to keep his wife from pilfering!

The searing humiliation of it, the tainted blood, the fatal inheritance—his mind came up against it as against a stone wall. The *impossibility*!

The alternative? To tell that precious, trusting little girl, with her childlike eyes and her innocent mouth, that he could not marry her without feeling degraded, that everything was over between them, and that he deliberately willed it to be so? Again that sheer wall! The *impossibility* of it!

Then, as he reached the veranda, he saw the third path plain.

Glistening on the lawn, where he had tossed it, the discarded *amanita*—the destroying angel—answered his question.

He could not marry a thief, for he could not let a child bear that hideous inheritance. He could not break Jinty's heart. But if he were out of the way, her life would go on as it had been before he came into it, with her parents to safeguard her from the world's knowledge of her curse.

Jinty would never suspect that his death was not accidental. She would remember only how he loved her, whereas, if he lived, he would bring deep sorrow to her. He was not going to hurt Jinty—God help him!

At that moment his face, aflame with resolution, was strangely like the face of the quixotic boy who, sixty years before, had smiled straight into the evil eyes of an older man as he fired his dueling pistol into the air.

It was characteristic of Trenholm not to falter when he had once made a decision. He picked up the piece of bark, with its freight of "blushers," and dropped among them the deadly *amanita*, not very different in appearance to the casual eye. Then, taking them to the kitchen, he asked old Aunt Mahaly to prepare them for his luncheon, but to let nobody else taste them.

Then he hurried back to find Jinty. He must make their last hour together a happy memory. She came toward him with her pretty shyness, and he caught her in his arms with a rush of tenderness so strong that it overpowered him—as if he would shut her off from all the harm in the world, from cruelty, from suspicion, from whispering tongues.

He loved her, he loved everything about her, every word and way of hers. That evil inheritance was not Jinty—it was a fungus which had fastened on her from the outside. Nothing of evil was Jinty!

Presently the Malcolms joined them, and led Trenholm to the western terrace to see the view. He had almost a sensation of relief when luncheon was announced. "It were well it were done quickly."

"It's a special compliment to you that my husband has come to the table," Mrs. Malcolm smiled at Trenholm. "Since his illness, Frank has rarely had his meals with us; and you refuse to offer him a taste of your private and exclusive dish?"

"I'm merely proving to Jinty that the blusher is a member in good standing of a pariah family," he carefully explained to Mr. Malcolm.

Trenholm was very explicit on the point of its edibility, and he ate the mushrooms to the very last drop of the cream dressing.

The table talk was more or less perfunctory, though from time to time Trenholm made spasmodic efforts to join in. Louder was the clamor in his mind. As far as he could recall, it was several hours before

the symptoms of poisoning began — paroxysms of agonizing pain, which could not be alleviated, an unquenchable thirst, often convulsions toward the end. Jinty must be kept away from him. She must not look on the livid horror he presently would be.

He heard her voice with a soft undercurrent of laughter:

"Mother, don't be deceived because Tren's trying to curry favor with you and daddy by his 'silent deference'! He never stops talking a minute, and you might just as well find it out in the beginning. Daddy dear, can't you eat your ice?"

Mr. Malcolm pushed it aside, and, turning toward Trenholm, said in a matter-of-fact way:

"I have a certain repugnance to frozen desserts, as that was the medium through which my wife made away with her first husband."

The butler went on serving as if nothing out of the ordinary had been said. Mrs. Malcolm's expression underwent no special change, but her foot must have pressed a bell, for almost immediately Miss Dorr appeared.

"I am not blaming my dear wife," continued Mr. Malcolm. "Her husband was a brute who had made her suffer every indignity—"

"Father was a minister," Jinty whispered in an aside to Trenholm, "and when I was a baby he was drowned trying to rescue a little boy."

"The man had a beast's appetite, and my wife decided to make his gluttony serve her ends. She prepared a dinner, of which I recall only the broiled lobster and the rich ice cream. He ate voraciously, and died of an attack of acute indigestion."

"If you are ready for me to read to you now, Mr. Malcolm?" Miss Dorr suggested suavely. "I'm quite impatient to go on with our story."

The butler assisted him to rise from his chair, and, leaning on the nurse, Mr. Malcolm dragged himself from the room.

Mrs. Malcolm rose, too, as if unendurably oppressed, and coffee was served in the sunny room adjoining.

"Suppose you see if Miss Dorr needs any help, daughter."

When Jinty left the room, her mother continued:

"It must have been a terrible shock to you to see my husband's condition. He has the kindest, tenderest nature, and he

has loved Jinty as if she were his own child. For years he led a very active business life, and it was his habit to read himself to sleep with detective stories. When this breakdown came, about six months ago, it was his mind that went first. I had to bring Jinty back from college. Frank would be so keenly sensitive about his condition, if he were aware of it, that we two have kept it to ourselves as far as possible. Jinty thought it would be better for you to see how things are than for me to write to you. His mania is to ascribe every possible crime to Jinty or me, but invariably with my first husband as the cause. There must have been a subconscious jealousy, but I am sure that Frank was unaware of it. Miss Dorr told me that he took some money out of your room this morning—'to keep Jinty from stealing it,' he said. We must put him first in every way now that he is so ill, and you and Jinty must not consider marriage for the present. The doctors say that he cannot live more than a few months. I wanted to tell you this before you and Jinty discussed matters, but I know you both will agree with me."

"Yes, entirely."

Trenholm spoke through parched lips. Was the horrible thirst beginning?

"There's another matter. My little daughter is the least mercenary person in the world, as you will find. Later on, she wishes for me to learn what your salary is, and for her annual allowance to be exactly the same. She said, 'I want to have just what Tren has after we're married—not a dime less and not a nickel more.' But I shall give you two a simple home of your own as a wedding gift. There's no sense of intimate possession about rented houses."

He stammered some incoherent words of gratitude. He would never live in that little house of dreams, madman that he had been! Madman!

"Where's Jinty?" he demanded abruptly. "She has been gone so long!"

And time was so short, his pulses hammered wildly!

Mrs. Malcolm smiled at the absorption of a young lover to whom even home and income were dull topics compared with the one beloved presence. As Jinty came into the room, her mother withdrew.

Shamefaced and downcast, Jinty made her confession like a penitent child:

"After all the beautiful things you said about perfect faith, Tren, I failed you at

the very first test! From the glum way you looked the moment you tasted the mushrooms, I knew you knew they were the canned ones. I just was so scared by that talk about death caps, and man-killers, and the way mushrooms seemed to pick out nice people to kill off, that I went into the kitchen before lunch to see how they looked. Aunt Mahaly has been with us ever since I can remember, and when she saw that I was worried, she began to fuss. 'Dey ain't no sense in my chile up-sottin' herse'f 'count uv pizen trash dat ain't fitten fer hawgs ter eat!' she said. Before I knew what she was about, she had taken off the lid and dumped the mushrooms in the fire! So I made her fix some canned ones, and I hoped you wouldn't notice it if they were smothered in cream dressing; but honestly, honestly, I began to feel so ashamed of not having limitless trust in you as a mycol—what is it that

you are?—that I had made up my mind to confess even before you found out. Oh, Tren, you are so sweet to me!"

This meant that she was crushed so rapidly against his breast that further comment seemed superfluous.

He was too shaken to speak at first. Then his words came chokingly:

"Darlingest, wonderfulest, little precious sweetheart, one can't swear to perfect faith, because it takes a perfect person to give it. I'm not going to confess all my damn fool faults to you; but oh, Jinty, how I love you, how I adore you!" A sudden apprehension made him add anxiously: "I hope you didn't scold Mahaly, darling?"

"I certainly did," declared Jinty valiantly. "I told her she was a destroying angel, and that it was a perfectly abominable thing to be—but that I was going to give her a new silk dress to wear at my wedding!"

THE RIVER OF TIME

THE years are going,
Like rivers flowing,
And, with them gliding,
We drift, we two!
There is no abiding,
No place to hide in,
Escape is none where the Fates pursue.
Oh, river of time,
Like a dream you bore us,
With ripple and rime,
And the world before us
All a young glory
Of music and morning!
Oh, 'twas a wonderful
World to be born in,
Painted with flowers
And a dazzle with dew—
A wonderful world
To be born in with you!

Spring we sped by—
Too soon 'twas behind us;
Summer came gleaming;
Lost in our dreaming,
Never a thought
That autumn would find us
Had you and I.
The river must run
Far out of the sun,
Far, far out to sea;
But wherever it glide,
Beloved, side by side,
With the stars all about us,
We still shall be—we!

Oliver C. Moore

The King of Stony Valley

HOW A NEW ERA CAME TO A REMOTE MOUNTAIN CORNER
OF THE GREAT NORTHWEST

By Alexander Hull

JANET MARCH was driving her Ford relentlessly up the mountain road. A June storm was brewing. The bold, humped shoulder of Stone Mountain was already invisible, hidden in a sable pall that was almost continually rent by sharp lightning. Indeed, the whole range of the Green Mountains, as they were locally known, was capped by the darkness of chaotic storm, now sweeping down into the valleys.

The road was still touched by the western sun, and the blended effect of forest green, the thin gold of the sun, and the blue of the impending rain, gave the atmosphere a weird luminosity. It seemed charged with a mysterious and sinister force, strongly magnetic.

Janet felt it tingling in her body. She was nervous, depressed, and a little frightened, though not of the storm. As for that, she simply wanted to get home before it broke. She had no tire chains with her. She pushed the car, a second-hand one, though in good condition, to its very limit of performance.

Her ranch was still more than a mile away when a premonitory gust of wind blew over the forest, tuning the harps of the trees to a low-pitched thunder, as of surf on a beach. It may have been this that masked the approach of her car to the rider ahead. She turned a sharp curve and saw, two hundred feet away, a man on a chestnut horse. He was breasting the wind, holding his hat in his left hand, guiding his horse with his right.

At that instant the horse reared on his haunches, then sprang madly off the road into the trees. The first low-hanging branch, at the very edge of the road, caught the rider and raked him from the saddle. He fell backward and sidewise, and dropped to the roadside, a limp heap. In the con-

fusion of the moment Janet could not tell whether the hoofs of the horse had struck him or not.

With set brakes she brought the car to a standstill only a few feet from the fallen man.

He did not stir as she got out, and, bending over him, her first thought was that he was dead. A wave of horror brought the second thought, which was that she, all unwittingly, had killed him. His horse had taken fright at her car.

Just over the man's forehead was a wound, wet with blood, where probably—for the abrasion seemed clean, and he had fallen with his face upward—the limb of the tree had struck him. A brief examination, however, convinced Janet that he was not dead. He was a young man, clean-shaven, with crisping, slightly curling hair, dressed in corduroy breeches and a flannel shirt.

She could do nothing for him here, and the storm was threateningly climbing the last ridge to the east. With only a momentary hesitation she put her hands beneath his shoulders. Drawing upon all her reserve of strength, she managed at length, lifting, tugging, dragging his inert body, to get him into the rear seat of the car.

Then she took the wheel, breathing hard, and resumed her race with the approaching storm. She did not quite win it, but she drove into the ranch yard in its first violence, and, springing out of the car, with just a glance at the sagging figure of her still unconscious passenger, she ran to the house and called:

"Dave! Dave!"

Her brother, a young man of nineteen, met her in the hall.

"Here, Janet!"

"Dave, has Ben come in yet?"

Dave nodded.

"He came in about two o'clock, and went to town. You didn't meet him?"

A flash of scorn appeared in her face.

"No! Scared out, Dave?"

"I don't think so," answered Dave.

"Some one came for him—said his brother had had a stroke. He told me to tell you he'd sure be back in a day or two."

"Father?"

Dave smiled.

"Up the branch, hunting specimens. Be home any minute now—looking like a drowned rabbit!"

"Then you must help me. Dave, I've got some one out in the car—hurt. You must go for a doctor."

Dave followed her out, listening to her explanation. Together, they carried the injured man into the house and put him in bed.

Just then Dr. March, their father, came in—a white-haired, kindly old gentleman with a look of absurd benevolence about him. For thirty years he had held, at the wages of penury, a chair in a small college some two hundred miles distant; and now, retired on a tiny pension, he had set to work with the enthusiasm of the twenties upon his *magnum opus*, a treatise on botany. He had found the Green Mountains a veritable treasury of specimens, and had decided to limit his volume to that region.

He came in soaked to the skin, but unaware of it. He would sit down in his study in that condition, if he were allowed, and shiver there without the least idea that he was cold. Indeed, the business of life on the ranch went on "right under his nose, but ten thousand miles away," as Ben Harris, the missing hired man, had put it.

However, he did sense that something unusual was afoot, and he inquired mildly what it was.

"I found a man hurt on the road, father," said Janet, "and I'm sending Dave for a doctor."

"A doctor, eh? H-m—quite right," murmured her father, exhibiting no further curiosity.

In fact, he was already far away in his own dream world.

"Good-by, Dave," said Janet. "Remember, drive carefully. You'd better get some gas before you start back. Come, father, you're terribly wet. You must go and change your clothes."

"I'm off," said Dave. "Any news?"

"No," replied Janet; "or—yes. I'll tell you when you get back."

Janet March was twenty-seven. She was not a beautiful girl, in the ordinary acceptation of the term, but she was sturdily, splendidly built, with gray-blue eyes and a lovely crop of shimmering dark hair, and there were moments when undeniably she had beauty. The fact that intelligence, courage, and endurance were component parts of her character was written plainly in her face and her bearing.

For five years, after leaving college, Janet had taught in the public schools; but at last she had grown thoroughly dissatisfied with the work. It was cut and dried, system-ridden. Moreover, it held no future, particularly for a woman. A man, especially one who knew how to play a clever game of politics—yes, he might get somewhere; but Janet March—no. Initiative had brought her no rewards, would bring her none—merely rebukes.

There was in her blood something of the spirit of the pioneer women of the country. She wanted to be striving, to be doing something tangible and visible; and, like those women, she had one other trait—a deep, abiding love for the beautiful, productive land.

Two years before, a chance trip into the Green Mountains had brought her to this very ranch. Stopping for a drink of water, she had picked a gnarled red apple from a scrubby little tree by the house. By all the evidence it should have been acrid and puckering to her mouth; yet, scaly and misshapen as it was, it had a flavor that was startlingly delicious. She had commented on it with surprise. The woman then living there had replied:

"All the apples up here have something a little extra in their flavor, miss. Some say it's the climate makes it, or the altitude. Some say it's the soil. Whatever it is, the fruit has it. They all spoke of it down at the stores in Greencamp. This would be prime orchard land—all this bench, I guess; but not for us. We're getting out just as soon as we can sell."

"You don't like it here? Why, it's perfectly beautiful!"

"It's slightly," admitted the woman; "but I'd a lot rather have some folks around that was neighbors, than scenery. It's too lonesome."

"You know how it seems to me?" smiled Janet. "Just restful!"

"Not my kind of rest," said the woman. "Too near Stony Valley for that!"

The words had conveyed nothing to Janet. Perhaps she had thought them merely figurative. It was not until much later that she found that Stony Valley was an actual place, just over the ridge to the east of her farm.

Her farm—for, of course, she had bought it. A year later, adding to her salary savings a small bequest from a distant relative, she had judged that she had enough money to try the plans she had slowly been forming ever since the day when she talked to the woman on the mountain.

She resigned her place in the schools, and journeyed to Greencamp. There, from a local real estate dealer, she learned that the farm was vacant. It had been sold in the interim to a man who, after living there for a few months, had become dissatisfied, and had put it in the hands of an agent for sale. It could be had, said the agent, "reasonably," because it was remote and largely unimproved. In the very saying, however, the man had sensed her determination to have that particular piece of land, and he had added three hundred dollars to its price.

He took her out on a trip of inspection, and there, hearing her plan to start an orchard, he bitterly regretted that he had not quoted a still higher price. It did not occur to Janet, partly because she was so much absorbed in her own dream, that the man was nervous, or, after their return to town, that he was cleverly managing to prevent her talking to any one else.

Possibly it wouldn't have mattered, in any case, for somehow that mountain farm was inextricably involved in her inmost dreams and in her future. She had a feeling of fatefulness about it. Enough land was cleared, and in pasture, to make a fine beginning of her orchard. She bought it eagerly, paying cash for it, almost as if it might get away from her if she delayed.

She had some capital left. Her father's pension was willingly placed in her hands, and Dave insisted on investing his share of the same inheritance that Janet had received. He was as enthusiastic about the enterprise as she was. In the winters, he was working his way through an agricultural college. He had one more year before graduation.

Janet had hired Ben Harris, a native of Greencamp, to help her. Now, a year after

her purchase of the farm, but only three months after they came to live there, she had five acres of young trees reaching their green finger tips into the beneficent mountain air, and their rootlets into the well drained, nourishing soil.

She had had no thought of misgiving. The week the Marches had arrived, however, a storekeeper in Greencamp, from whom she was purchasing supplies, had said:

"Ye ain't had any trouble with the Stony Valleys, I reckon?"

"Stony Valleys? You mean the people over the ridge from me?"

"Yup—call 'em the Stony Valleys around here."

"Why, no, of course not. Why would I have?"

"Dunno," said the man. "Some does, and some doesn't. I always figure that if a man doesn't bother them, they likely won't bother him."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, they're just a bunch of riffraff, and they—"

"You mean they might steal?" asked Janet, enlightened, as she thought.

"Yup—or do 'most anything, for that matter."

"I hope they won't bother me," said Janet, unmoved.

"I guess they won't," he agreed too readily.

When she went out to the car with Ben Harris, she asked him:

"What is this that I hear about Stony Valley?"

"Bunch of folks living across the ridge," said Ben laconically.

"Yes, but what is it like over there? What are they like? And what do they raise?"

"Raise?" said Ben. "Well, Miss March, I never hear of them raising anything over there but three things. One of 'em is moonshine, and another is more Stony Valleys, and the third is just plain hell. Them three things are all I ever heard of 'em raising at all, if you'll excuse the French, Miss March."

Janet's laughter pealed out over the noise of the engine.

"But I reckon they won't hardly bother you," Ben reassured her.

"Of course not!"

Yet two weeks ago she had awakened one morning to find a note under the farm-

house door. It was scrawled illiterately on a piece of soiled paper. It read:

No straingers neded up this ways. A wurd to the wise. Bettur get out.

Janet was not frightened—at least, she told herself she wasn't. It was absurd that her heart should be beating so thunderously and chokingly in her throat. It was only a joke! Of course, it was just a joke! If it was repeated, she would go into town and tell the marshal, or sheriff, or whoever it was that one told such things to. She burned the note and forgot it—or pretended that she did.

Ten days elapsed before there was another. This time Ben Harris found it tacked to the barn door. He brought it in to her, chewing a stem of grass and frowning thoughtfully. She read:

Mis March, keep yor old man away Stoney Vally or you will be sorry. Last warning. He will get hirt. You better all get out of hear. Not cum back ether.

"I don't reckon," said Ben slowly, but not convincingly, "that they will hardly do anything over here; but if I was you, Miss March, I'd tell the perfessor to go botanizing another way. I believe I would!"

Persistent questioning of her father developed that in his tramping he had stumbled upon some strange activity in the woods over the ridge, and that he had been threatened. In his single-minded devotion to the cause of botany, however, Dr. March had not thought the incident worthy of mention. He believed they had spoken of "croaking" him, and he seemed perfectly to understand that to croak meant to kill, but he had not taken it seriously. He had little concern with such loose talk. The men had been annoyed, yes—but this was, after all, a civilized country.

To Janet's pleading he had responded dryly:

"Why, certainly, my dear! If it worries you, I will stay away from that particular place. I think, anyway, I have obtained all the specimens that are necessary from that special locality."

She knew he would stay away, too—if he remembered.

A few days after that Dave had come home from school for the summer. His presence gave his sister renewed confidence. She did not immediately tell him of the two

notes she had received, but a third one—yesterday morning—had brought matters to a head. It was more threatening:

Thurd and last warning. Get out, you Marches. You got one weak.

As Janet gave the document to Dave, and told him of the two previous notes, she saw his face pale and his sharp young jaw become set. He, at least, had no intention of turning back; nor had Janet herself. Stony Valley could not frighten her away with empty threats, and at heart she did not believe that these warnings were anything more. Ben Harris, however, when they appealed to him, had not seemed so certain.

"They ain't above any sort of skuldugery, no matter how low," he said. "Of course—"

"If I catch a Stony Valley man on the place," interrupted Dave harshly, "I'll shoot him down like a dog!"

"Dave!" protested Janet, horrified.

"Your sister's right," said Ben, smiling a little. "First place, there's a right smart of 'em—twenty or thirty families, anyhow, and I ain't sure how many more. If you shot one of 'em, why, they'd be just like feud folks, I expect. They'd all go gunning for you!"

"We're going to protect our property!" said Dave fiercely.

"That's all right," nodded Ben; "only you'd better wait till they've done something. Can't shoot 'em just on suspicion, you know."

"I'm going to town, to complain to the authorities," said Janet.

"Well, I believe I would, Miss March," counseled Dave. "Don't know just how much good it 'll do, but—I believe I would."

II

So to-day Janet had gone; and now she understood Ben Harris better. She had gone first to the man who sold her the place, and, under a frontal attack, he had finally admitted that the last owner had been driven out by the threats of the Stony Valleys. He feebly excused himself by saying that he did at the time think of letting her know, but he decided that probably she already knew of it. Moreover, he didn't take any great stock in what the man told him.

"Look at how cheap it was, Miss March!" he protested. "You might have known something was—"

"You told me that was because it was so remote."

"And it is!" he cried promptly.

She flung him a glance of scorn and walked out.

There was a deputy sheriff in Green-camp. He avowed a perfect willingness to take a hand if there was "any real trouble, Miss March." And he went on:

"I reckon you'll find this is mostly just a hoax. Somebody's playing a little joke on you. Of course the minute there's any real trouble, why—er—you just call on me, and I'll be mighty glad to be at your service at any time. That's what I'm here for—yes'm!"

There was such a ring of speciosity in his words that she appraised the man at once as both a coward and a liar.

She then went to the man who had first spoken to her of Stony Valley, having found him friendly and believing him to be sincere.

"Is the deputy sheriff afraid of Stony Valley?" she asked.

The storekeeper smiled.

"I won't say he is, and I don't want to scare you, Miss March; but the last time a sheriff went over into Stony Valley he never came out again. They found his body. Apparently he had fallen over a cliff; but it's generally conceded that Stony Valley is unhealthy stomping ground for sheriffs and deputies."

"Is this a civilized country, then, or not?" asked Janet bitterly.

"Oh, I should say it is, Miss March," he replied; "only Stony Valley is quite a ways from here, and as long as it lets us alone, why—"

Janet's lip curled.

"They might do something for you over to the county seat," said the storekeeper. "Art Jones is sheriff over there, and there's one thing you can say about him, anyway—he ain't yellow. That ain't to say he ain't crooked, though."

Janet laughed contemptuously.

"I'll not go over there. Do you sell guns, Mr. Warren?"

"Guns? Why, yes."

"I want to buy two."

He stared after her when she went out of the store.

"A mighty fine girl!" he communed

with himself. "Grit to burn! Of course, something ought to be done about Stony Valley. It's a disgrace to the county; but then it ain't my business exactly. I don't hold any office."

So Janet had driven home in a white heat of excitement, and on the way she had picked up the injured man. Ben Harris, she was afraid, had deserted them, and now, as night was falling on the heels of the waning storm, she was a little frightened. Perhaps, after all, it would be better to—

No! With a sudden revulsion of feeling, hot anger surging up in her, she told herself that she would not give way, not for a dozen Stony Valleys! She would fight—yes, if necessary, even with guns—for her home and her dreams! If Ben didn't come back, she would find another man who wasn't a coward. They would set watch until Stony Valley committed some overt act, and then they would see if the authorities would act.

Three hours from the time of his departure Dave returned with Dr. Fahey, who made an examination, dressed the stranger's wound, and said that it didn't look as if anything serious was the matter. He'd had a hard blow, of course, but probably he'd be around in a few days as good as new.

"But he isn't even conscious!" protested Janet.

"Happens that way sometimes," said the doctor, unmoved. "I look to see him come to almost any time. Nothing in his pockets to tell who he is?"

"He had a watch with 'W. T.' engraved on it."

"Well, keep in touch with me," said the doctor vaguely. "As I say, I don't anticipate any complications. I'll try to see him to-morrow."

And in the morning, as Janet entered the room, she saw that the stranger was looking at her with puzzled eyes.

"Good morning," she said. "How are you now?"

He answered somewhat weakly:

"My head is pretty bad, and I feel weak, but I think I'm all right. Where am I? What happened?"

"Don't you remember? My car startled your horse, and he threw you. You're at my farm—I'm Janet March."

He frowned a little, and then his face lightened.

"Now I remember! But it wasn't your car. Boulder isn't afraid of cars. He wouldn't pay any attention to them. It was the shot."

"Shot!" echoed Janet.

He nodded.

"Some one fired at me from the bushes just as you turned the curve. Missed me, but it nicked one of Boulder's ears."

"You mean some one tried to—shoot you?" gasped Janet.

"There isn't any doubt about it. I heard the crack of the gun very plainly. I tried to spot where it came from, but it was all pretty sudden. Can you tell me what happened to Boulder?"

"He ran away," said Janet.

"Then he'll run home, I expect. He lives in Greencamp. I—I'm no end obliged to you, Miss—March. I'm afraid I've been a lot of trouble to you. I see you've had a doctor out. I—it's tremendously good of you!"

"Don't think of it at all," responded Janet warmly. She suddenly liked everything about this man—his clean-cut, lean features, the light in his eyes as he spoke, his voice, his air of thorough efficiency. "Dr. Fahey advised complete quiet for a day or two, at least."

He smiled.

"I'll be good. I feel like quiet, Miss March. Only I'm so sorry to be troubling you."

"Is there any one we should notify, Mr.—"

"Taylor," she thought he said. "No, there's no one."

Most of that day he slept. Late in the afternoon Ben Harris returned, and Janet welcomed him with unfeigned relief. Ben grinned sheepishly.

"Sho' now! You didn't go for to think I'd deserted, did you?"

"No, no!"

"My brother's lots better to-day. I brought my gun along with me. I've been talking to a few folks in town. That depity—he's yellere 'n turmeric; but there's some of the boys—if you have any trouble, why—you've got friends, all right. You ain't been here very long, Miss March, but there's some few men roundabouts that've got too much decency to see you bothered. If you and me and Dave can't work this thing out satisfactory, why, there's others."

"Thank you for that, Ben!" said Janet gratefully.

"Don't mention it," said Ben. "Just saw Dave down below. I'll get along now and fix things so's to get to spraying in the morning. Meantime Dave and me are going to set up a little watch party. We'll spell each other, just in case—"

Janet hesitated for a moment, and then she said:

"Did Dave tell you about the man who was hurt? His name is Taylor. He says that some one shot at him."

"Stranger around here, I guess."

"I—well, I don't know. I didn't ask."

"Don't know his business, either?"

"I haven't really talked to him. Dr. Fahey said to keep him quiet."

"I don't understand the shooting," said Ben thoughtfully. "Nobody around here would do it, except Stony Valley folks; and I wouldn't think they'd go quite that far."

That night Ben and Dave watched in four-hour shifts from nine until dawn. They heard nothing, saw nothing. Yet, later in the morning, Ben discovered, at the edge of the orchard, one of the trees ringed about with a knife, its leaves already drooping. A strip of bark an inch wide had been removed. Tied to the trunk was another note, which Ben, detaching, took to the house.

At the moment Janet was in the living room talking to her enforced guest, who had risen half an hour earlier and dressed himself, and was now declaring himself perfectly fit.

Ben Harris, approaching the house, saw the stranger standing by the window and glancing out toward Stone Mountain. Stepping behind the convenient curtain of a lilac bush, Ben observed the man carefully for a moment. Then, shaking his head and frowning with a puzzled air, he walked to the porch and rapped at the door, calling:

"Miss March! Like to see you a minute, please!"

"Come right in," called Janet.

"Rather you'd come out, if you don't mind."

Janet came, and, with a word of explanation, Ben handed her the slip of paper that he had taken from the tree. It said:

Two days gone. We mean bisness. Move, you Marches.

"I'll sleep in the orchard to-night," said Ben grimly. "A shotgun makes a pretty good persuader for tree ringers!"

Janet nodded. She went into the house with tears of anger and dismay in her eyes. Taylor turned, and, with a look of concern in his face, asked quickly:

"Is anything wrong, Miss March? Can I help you?"

She shook her head.

"I owe you a great deal," he went on. "I'd be glad if I thought I could do something, even if it was only a little, to repay you."

"There is no need for you to be drawn into it," she answered.

"Tell me—do, please!" he begged.

She shook her head again, and smiled.

"No, Mr. Taylor. It's nothing. That is—it's something, quite unimportant, that concerns—just us."

He bowed acceptance of her reserve, and said:

"I should have been glad if I could have helped; but if I can't, it's quite all right. I think I ought to go into town and look up my horse."

"To-day?"

"I feel perfectly fit—just as good as new. I rather fancy stretching my legs in a good long hike."

"I don't think you ought to," said Janet. "If you'll wait until to-morrow, I'll drive you in; but I can't go to-day."

He hesitated.

"I've been no end of bother already, but I'd like to stay if I may—if I won't be in the way."

"Not at all."

"Thank you! You see," he went on, "I didn't—I wasn't in a position to enjoy my last drive with you. This one will be different; and then I'd really like to become acquainted with your brother and your father, because—I'd like to come back here again some day—soon."

Janet flushed. She wasn't deaf to the tone of his voice, or blind to what was in his face; nor could she pretend that she did not know that his words really meant:

"I find you lovely, and I don't want to lose you."

She answered conventionally enough:

"That would be nice, and I know my father would be perfectly delighted to have some one to show his specimens to. Perhaps—who knows?—you would be helping me, too. It might make him contented and willing to stay in for a few days, and that would be a relief to me."

"Yes?"

In his voice and in his eyes there was such sympathetic interest that she went on, against her previous decision, to say:

"We've had an annoying experience, Mr. Taylor. We haven't had this farm long. We've been living on it only a few months. There are some people over the ridge—the Greencamp folk call them the Stony Valleys. Father, who is perfectly blind to everything that goes on except just what happens to interest him, was out gathering specimens, and he stumbled on a still. The Stony Valleys are moonshiners, it seems, as well as thieves. They resented father's presence, and warned him that they would kill him if he came there again. He says he won't go in that direction, but, if he should need another specimen that was growing there, he would never remember!"

"The Stony Valleys!" said Taylor harshly. "I've heard of them before. Is that your trouble, Miss March?"

"That, and the fact that they seem determined to make me move out and abandon my farm. I'm determined that I won't."

"Do you mean that they've threatened you?" he asked sharply.

"They've given me a week to move out; and that was two days ago."

His response was, she told herself, exactly what she had known it would be:

"Miss March, I wish you'd let me stay and help you!"

"I'm not afraid," said Janet. "I have Dave and Ben Harris."

"I—I've had experience with—with that kind of people, Miss March," he urged. "And I have a score of my own to pay, too."

"You mean?"

"Would any one but a Stony Valley have been likely to shoot at me?"

"Perhaps they were trying to frighten you away. If you want to stay—"

He caught her hand and pressed it hard.

"I do! I do!"

III

ON two of the ensuing days Taylor accompanied Dr. March on his botanizing trips, acting as the professor's bodyguard, and leading him, with a mild but inflexible determination, away from the direction of Stony Valley. On another day he went to town with Janet on her weekly trip, and while there found that his horse, Boulder,

had returned, practically uninjured, to the man from whom he had recently bought him.

Janet had not as yet asked the reason for Taylor's presence on the mountain road that day, but he volunteered now that he, too, was looking for land, as she had once been.

"Rather looking the land over," he amended. "I was up here once before—quite a few years ago. I always thought I'd come back. I have some money, and I think your orchard idea is—well, it's worth trying."

The lines of worry, that should not have been there, deepened in her face.

"Yes—if it weren't for Stony Valley; but until that is settled—"

"But that's going to be settled."

"Do you think so?"

"I know it. You and I will settle it, Miss March!"

She didn't know how, but suddenly she had faith that they would. She was grateful to him for the faith, for he, of course, had brought it to her.

The thought that he, too, might buy land near her, might make her isolation less complete, made her happy all that day—which was the day before the last day of the truce granted by Stony Valley. She drove home in a gay mood, discounting danger, scoffing at the idea that the penciled warnings had been anything more than bluff.

Dave, too, liked Taylor. Dr. March, after those two botanizing expeditions, regarded him as little less than a disciple. Ben Harris alone looked on him without visible enthusiasm.

At supper that evening Ben's manner was characteristic. When Taylor was not looking at him, he was scanning Taylor with a furtive but persistent scrutiny. If Taylor did look at him, Ben's eyes were upon his plate, and his attention was devoted solely and sincerely to the consumption of food. If Taylor addressed him, Ben's replies were monosyllabic grunts, quite out of character.

Janet smiled. Ben was the true provincial of the mountain sections. He regarded all strangers with suspicion, or, at best, with uncordiality.

The last night of the uneasy, nerve-racking week came on cloudy, with an intermittent high wind. It was dark early

in the evening, and the darkness soon increased to a blackness that was thick and impenetrable.

Ben Harris, on watch at the edge of the orchard, complained silently to himself. If villainy were afoot, it would be impossible to imagine a fitter night for its successful accomplishment. It was Ben's plan that all three men, Dr. March being excepted as useless, should watch the night through. He hoped, as he told Janet, to teach the Stony Valleys, if they came with hostile intent, a lesson that would suffice them for all time.

Dave, also armed, patrolled the region of the barn. Taylor was left guarding the house. Each man had orders to signal with a shot if anything seemed amiss, and this signal was to bring the other two.

Before midnight, save for the gusty wind and the trees threshing about like great beasts in the darkness, all was quiet. At twelve Janet took coffee and sandwiches out to the sentries. She returned to the house, and she and Taylor were sitting on the porch, conversing in lowered tones, when suddenly there was the sound of a shot.

Taylor sprang up and snatched his gun. "That's Harris!" he said.

Followed by Janet, he ran swiftly down toward the orchard. On their way they encountered Dave, and presently they found Harris crouching low by a stump.

"What is it?" asked Janet softly.

"Seen anything?" demanded Taylor.

"No. Heard 'em, though, out in the brush."

"You probably scared them off," said Dave excitedly.

At that instant, mocking the words, a voice bellowed on the windy night from the blackness of the ridge:

"Time's up for you Marches! You had plenty of warning!"

There was a moment's silence, broken in upon by Janet's sharp, choking gasp. Suddenly Taylor started toward the brush. Harris caught at him as he passed.

"Hey, where you going?" inquired Ben.

Taylor paused for an instant, and then blazed at him passionately:

"After them, man—after them!"

Carried away by the tenseness of his voice, Harris sprang up and followed. After a bare second of hesitation Dave and Janet went after them. When they caught up with Ben, he was standing still. For

two hundred yards they had followed close on his heels.

"Where's Taylor?" Dave March said breathlessly.

"Gone, damn him!" replied Harris.

"What do you mean, Ben?" asked Janet, surprised.

"I mean," said Harris in low, angry tones, "that all along I've felt there was something familiar about him. I've been trying to place him ever since I first saw him. I'm the biggest dumb fool in the Green Mountains! His name ain't Taylor—it's *Tyler!*"

"Tyler?"

"Yes, Tyler! Bill Tyler—that's who it is! He's a Stony Valley, and the worst of 'em all. They used to call him the King of Stony Valley. It's always the hardest-drinking, hardest-hitting, and meanest guy that rules over in Stony Valley, and that's Bill Tyler!"

"He isn't *like* that," said Janet swiftly. "That's utterly absurd! You can *see* he isn't!"

"It's him, though," said Ben determinedly. "That was what fooled me so long. He didn't talk nor look like a Stony Valley. I'm a fool; but I hadn't seen him for seven or eight years, and then I only saw him once or twice. Miss March, it's him. I was on the draft board that passed him into the service, and I'll say it was sure against his will. He liked fighting all right enough, but he didn't crave to fight Germans. He was only a kid then—twenty-one or two; but they called him the King of Stony Valley right then. His father was king before him, and when the old man got killed in the woods, why, Bill stepped right into his shoes. He licked every feller that disputed him. He was the orneriest one of the whole kit and bilin' of 'em. If Stony Valley was hell in those days—and that's about what it was—he was the biggest devil in it!"

"I don't believe it," said Janet.

"No'm, but it's so," answered Ben. "And now we've let him go and stampede us, and there's nobody up to the house but your father, Miss March. I say we'd better be getting back there as quick as we can!"

Before the red flare that rose suddenly on the darkness behind them, Janet's disbelief went down. They broke into a run, and crashed through the brush into the open orchard. Ahead, the barn was a mass of flame. Running back and forth before

it, Dr. March was wildly gesticulating and shouting for help; but no help, they saw as they came nearer, would save the barn. The incendiaries had done their work only too thoroughly.

Then Janet knew that Ben Harris had told her the truth. Taylor *was* Tyler. She turned to ask one other question:

"Who is king over there now?"

"If he's over there, *he is*," said Ben grimly. "You can bank on that. He never came back after the war, and since then his cousin, Dan Tyler, has been king. Bill seems to have put on sheep's clothing in the last eight years; but he's the same old Bill, and I'm going to see that he goes to the pen for to-night's work!"

Janet ran off toward the house. Before she reached it, the storm of disillusion and bitterness broke in her heart. She went in and flung herself on her bed, sobbing uncontrollably. She knew now that she had fallen in love with the man whom Ben called the King of Stony Valley. She would tear that love from her heart! Ah, yes—she *was* tearing it out, root and branch and blossom; but how it hurt—how it hurt!

IV

SHE did not go out again that night. Toward dawn she drifted into a light, troubled sleep, from which she was awakened by the sound of a car. She went to the window. Some one was driving out of the lane.

Dressing, she went to the kitchen and started the fire. From the window she looked out upon the charred, black skeleton of the barn. It would cost at least a thousand dollars to rebuild it. Fortunately she had not lost either of the horses, or the cow, for they had been in a small corral near the house, and were now in the south pasture lot. Ben had just released them. He came now to the kitchen door.

"Good morning, Miss March!"

"Good morning. Nothing more happened last night?"

He shook his head.

"Enough as 'twas," he said.

"Did I hear Dave drive away?"

"He went down the mountain—to telephone," Ben told her. "He ought to be back any minute now."

Dave was, in fact, home before Janet had breakfast ready. There was an air of constraint upon all three of them as they

ate. They did not talk of what had happened in the night, nor did they mention Tyler; yet it was Tyler who occupied the minds of all three, and it was he who had put the constraint upon them. They ate almost silently, speaking in monosyllables.

Ben seemed to be looking out of the window most of the time. It occurred to Janet that he, too, was watching for the thing that she both dreaded and desired—Tyler's return to the ranch.

Then, suddenly, like a revelation, the past night seemed to her just the black chaos of a bad dream. In the morning sunlight it was incredible. She saw Taylor again in her mind's eye—his clear eyes, his honest, strong face. She knew that he was clean—clean!

With horror, the thing they had done last night surged over her. He had come as a friend, and he had tried to help them. He had gone, foolishly brave, foolishly but splendidly reckless, into the brush after the Stony Valleys, and perhaps even now he lay hurt, or—or—dead, under the bright sunlight and the green forest shade!

They had deserted him, and it seemed to her now a shameful thing. Surely Ben was mistaken! He had been misled by a possible likeness of feature, a similarity in name. It had been eight years, he confessed, since he had seen the King of Stony Valley.

No such doubt was visible in the faces of Dave and Ben. Janet knew they were convinced that their former guest was Tyler, and believed that he had deliberately lured them away so that the barn could be destroyed. The shot that had caused her to bring him here? Perhaps they didn't believe his story. No, of course they didn't; but she—she did! Yet it would be hopeless, she felt, to try to convince them.

Breakfast over, Ben said:

"I thought we'd go and look after"—he paused, unwilling to say "Taylor," and hesitating, for her sake, at "Tyler"—"after the missing man, Miss March. Dave went down and telephoned to town, and some of the boys are coming out to help us."

She nodded. Why were they going? To help Taylor, or to—to fight? Well, that was man's work. She would make no protest now; but when the moment came for woman's work, she would be there!

Two cars rolled up the lane, and from them came seven men, all armed. Ben and

Dave conferred with them in lowered tones for a few minutes. Then Ben came to the porch.

"Miss March, we're going over there—into Stony Valley. We're going to find Taylor, first of all. I promise you there won't be any shooting unless we have to. That's all. We're going to spread out and work our way quietly through the brush, and we're going to come together up the branch in the valley where the old Tyler place is. I have a hunch we'll find him there. We'll be back—when we get our man!"

"I'm going to go with you," said Janet quietly.

"No, Miss March! You can't—"

"Can't?" interrupted Janet, with a short laugh. "Try to stop me!"

With one look at her face and her blazing eyes, he surrendered.

For an hour the ten of them crept through the sun-drenched brush of the ridge, without talk or signal. Janet kept close to Dave. No one was encountered on the way.

Dave and Janet finally reached a knoll that closely overlooked the Tyler cabin, which stood in an open space at the edge of a quiet sheet of the waters of Stony Creek. Half a dozen of the men had arrived before them, and, as they crept forward, Ben Harris halted and held up a warning hand.

"Tyler's down there," he whispered. "Something queer's going on. There's more'n a dozen Stony Valleys there now. Come up closer, and you can see 'em in front of the house. More'n that, you can hear every word they say, when they don't all talk it once."

As Janet looked, she saw with sinking heart that the man she had tried to believe in was there!

At that moment four other men rode up to the house on horses, and dismounted. As if this were a signal, the men of Stony Valley formed in a semicircle. One of the newcomers stood slightly in advance of the semicircle.

"That's Dan Tyler, Bill's cousin," whispered Ben. "He's king now."

Bill Tyler stood alone before the circle, leaning against a hitching post, ten feet removed from the group. It was he who spoke first.

"Well, Dan, I've come back, after all!" he said.

The other laughed and answered harshly: "You stayed away too long, Bill!"

Janet started. This was the voice that had shouted from the brush of the ridge on the previous night.

"It looks as if I have," answered Bill Tyler.

"Sure does!" responded Dan.

"But now that I have come back," Bill went on, "there are a few little matters that we'll have to take up together."

"I don't know of any," said Dan insolently. "You've been gone too long, Bill. You ain't a Stony Valley any more. You've got yourself all soft and civilized, Bill. You used to be a pretty hard guy, but you ain't any more, and we don't need you in Stony Valley. I'm king here, and I'm giving orders right now for you to git out—you and your snooping friends acrost the ridge!"

There was a slight stir among the men behind him.

"Wait a minute!" said Bill, raising his voice. "We'll let that talk about me being soft slide by for a minute or two. Dan, you're making a big mistake about being king. You were up till yesterday—that's all. To-day, and from now on, I'm king. Though we were bad enough up here, there's one thing we didn't used to do before you got to be king—and that's fight women; and we're quitting it now!"

Dan stepped a pace forward with an angry bellow, crouching.

"Just one thing more!" said Bill sharply. "You men of Stony Valley, listen to me! You know Dan, and you know me. I used to be a little bit harder than Dan. Maybe I am still; but there's one thing sure—there isn't room up here for both of us any more. I aim to stay, and Dan doesn't want me to stay. Maybe some of you happen to know where he was about a week ago, one afternoon, after he heard I was on my way back—and what he was doing!"

"That's a lie!" bellowed Dan.

"Wait a minute, Dan," said one of the men behind him. "I've got a hankerin' idee where you was. What I don't figger is how as good a shot as you ever missed him!"

"He'd have got me along Noak's Hill," said Bill, "if it hadn't been for a car coming just then that he hadn't heard for the wind. The car scared him, and he missed."

"A damned lie!" bawled Dan.

"He broke and ran, but I got one glimpse of him," said Bill; "and now I'm willing to settle the score."

"Fight it out, boys!" said a Stony Valley man.

V

DAN, with an oath, rushed. Bill, awaiting the rush, stepped suddenly aside at the last moment, and shot in a stinging blow to the head. Dan recovered, wheeled about, and sprang at his antagonist again. This was the Stony Valley method of fighting—catch as catch can. They were all wrestlers rather than boxers.

Dan Tyler had strength and endurance in a superlative degree. He was, moreover, rated a tricky fighter, but he sensed no need of tricks now. His plan, obviously, was to get his cousin in his bearlike grip and crush him into unconsciousness. He believed that Bill Tyler's civilized appearance indicated him as soft and enervated by his years of easy life. Once he got his hold on his rival, he considered the fight ended.

The other man, as if he sensed that danger perfectly, danced back and forth, slipping in hard blows whenever an opening offered, then leaping away, twisting, turning, dodging. Dan flung off the blows with grunts of derisive scorn. They were hurting him, it was true, but once he got hold of Bill there would be no more of them. He felt confident that it could not go on much longer.

In this last idea he was right. Presently Bill turned too short by an inch, and Dan's right hand closed on his shoulder with a grip of steel; but there was in that shoulder a deceptive strength. Moreover, Bill was wearing no Stony Valley homespun shirt, with the tensile strength of rope, but light madras. Half the shirt tore from his chest, and he broke his enemy's hold. In the breakaway he struck out—a short jab to the chin, which apparently had little force; but Dan, caught off balance, went to the earth, where for a moment he stayed, crouching on hands and knees, inviting an attack.

Too obvious! Bill was not to be so easily tricked. With a laugh he stood waiting until Dan, snarling, came to his feet and rushed again.

He charged blindly, with cyclonic fury. It seemed impossible that any one should evade him save by running away. He was

crouching in such a position that no opening for blows offered save the hard top of his skull, the bunched muscles of his shoulders and his brawny, extended arms. Yet, twisting and turning, Bill Tyler still escaped that gorilla clutch with a skill that was little short of miraculous.

Impossible to say how long this might have gone on, for suddenly, as Bill's back was turned for an instant, one of the Stony Valley men behind him stepped forward, and, thrusting two hands to his shoulders, gave him a quick, forcible shove.

"Git in and fight, damn yuh!" he yelled.

Bill half stumbled, flung forward, and seemed to leap straight into the arms of his antagonist.

Janet suppressed a gasp of dismay.

Below, the two figures were interlocked, surging backward and forward. They went to their knees, then staggered up again and again. At last, with a spasmodic convulsion, they were flung forcibly apart. For an instant they stood facing each other. Again Dan leaped forward, the aggressor. Bill met the rush crouching, and, closing on his antagonist, by a split second the quicker, he came up straight and threw Dan clear with tremendous force.

The difficulty with which Dan got to his feet this time was plainly no pose. Twice he made the effort before he succeeded; and the third time, before his feet were well set, a lightning blow to the point of his chin dropped him forward on his face, unconscious.

Panting, bruised and torn, the king of Stony Valley faced his subjects.

"I've come back," he said harshly.

"Does anybody doubt it?"

There was a momentary silence. Then one of the men said, laughing:

"Nobody doubts it, Bill. Tell you the truth, we was gettin' kind of sick of Dan, anyhow."

"All right!" said Bill. "Now, men, Dan's going out of the valley—just as soon as he turns over money enough to pay for that barn he burned last night. That's first. Next, anybody that wants to go with him and hunt a wilder place can get his goods together to-night, because this valley's going to be a changed place. Men, we're a hundred years behind the times up here. I never realized it till I got outside and bumped up against civilized folks; but I know it now, and I've come back to tell you that you've got to come through.

There's going to be a school up here, right soon. If any of you thinks he's going to go on moonshining, why, that's all right, but he's going out of the valley to do it. You're going to quit raising hell around here, and start in raising gardens and orchards. If there's anybody here besides Dan that thinks I'm wrong about this, why, he'd better say so right now, and we'll fight it out!"

For a moment they stood facing one another, the King of Stony Valley and his men. Then the tension loosened, the group stirred, and some one, acting as spokesman, said amiably:

"All right, king! Jes' as you say!"

Janet turned to face Dave and Ben and the other men. In her eyes there was triumph, mingled with tears of excitement and relief. Ringing in her ears were the words the man down below had said to her on the way home from Greencamp:

"But that's going to be settled. You and I will settle it, Miss March!"

"I don't think we're really needed here," she said.

"It don't look like it, Miss March," Ben replied meekly.

That evening Janet sat waiting on her porch—waiting, unabashed, for the King of Stony Valley. She knew that he would come, and she knew what he would have to say to her.

All that day she had been picturing to herself the reactions of the wild youth, William Tyler, when the draft had torn him from his mountain valley and flung him into a world in which he was no king, but just an insignificant pawn. She could imagine how he had realized depths and heights of life of which he had never dreamed. Probably the army had held him only a few months, and since then—well, it was evident he had gone to school, and had learned some of the things that were most worth while.

Yes, she guessed what he would have to say to her—and she knew what her answer would be!

It was almost dark, but there was still light enough to distinguish a figure coming up rapidly through the orchard. It was a man, but it was not Dave, or Ben Harris, or her father.

Janet March got up from her chair and walked down to meet him.

Mary Quite Contrary

A BELLE OF THE WATER FRONT SHOWS HER STRATEGICAL SKILL IN LOVE AFFAIRS AND PUGILISTIC MATTERS

By E. Waldo Long

THE hush of dawn lay over the harbor when Mary Kolchak hurried out upon the forward deck of the ferryboat. The weird cries of the great gray gulls that circled high overhead were almost the only sounds to break the silence. The sun was just peeping up out of the sea, spilling a path of yellow across the water. The morning mists were drifting over the harbor, and the riding lights still gleamed on the ships that swung at anchor.

Even the early risers who made the ferry trip every day of the year drank in the crisp salt air and gazed about at the ships that lay motionless at their berths; but Mary Kolchak had eyes only for the white fruit steamer across the harbor.

It seemed a long time to her before the ferryboat's whistle shattered the morning quiet and echoed and reëchoed among the piers and warehouses along the water front. Its steady progress across the water seemed unbearably slow, for in twenty minutes the fruit steamer La Plata would cast off her hawsers and bear away toward the open sea—and with the ship would go Mateo Ponce.

Half a dozen men studied Mary as she stood, oblivious of their presence, watching the white fruiter; and well they might, for she was a beautiful thing, with the blackest of hair, the smoothest of white skins, and perfectly molded features.

She stood poised, like a runner awaiting the starter's gun, as the ferry slowly nosed into the slip and the gangplank creaked down to the deck. She was away like a frightened thing when the deck hand dropped the chains that barred the way. A youth who set out to show her some speed barely held his own for a moment, and then had to watch Mary's flying heels twinkle rapidly away from him.

Running lightly out on Atlantic Avenue, she presented herself at the dock where the fruit steamer lay, and saluted the watchman who sat smoking inside the gate.

"Hello, admiral!" she beamed. "I got to see Mat."

The watchman's mask of indifference wrinkled into a grin. Grins habitually prevailed when Mary Kolchak was about.

"Who's Mat?" he inquired.

"Who's Mat?" she echoed, cocking her head at him in mock amazement. "Huh! Why, you don't know *nothing*!"

He made no reply to that, but merely continued to grin.

"He's steward on the La Plata," Mary explained, "and I'm goin' to see him before he sails. Snap out of it! Let me by!"

"Got a pass?" the watchman inquired indolently.

Mary looked startled; but then she brightened, plunged her hand into a pocket of her skirt, and drew forth a bit of paper that had been much folded. She handed it to the man; and he, removing his bulk from the narrow opening in the big gate, started to unfold it.

On the instant Mary darted past him.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Hey, come back here!"

But Mary's laughter mocked him as she fled down the long shed toward the steamer. The watchman blinked after her, stared at the moving picture handbill which she had handed him, began to chuckle, and resumed his chair.

"Hey, Mat!" Mary's voice shrilled from the wharf below the steamer. "Ship ahoy! Yoo-hoo! Yoo-hoo!"

From all over the ship, in reply, came derisive calls, and half a dozen grinning faces appeared in portholes.

"Go back, you bunch o' monkeys!"

Mary remarked. "I ain't got any peanuts with me this morning. Tell Mat Ponce, the steward, that he's wanted out here—on business!"

Almost before she had finished speaking, Ponce appeared on the deck. Mary stepped back into a dark corner of the shed; and there Mateo found her and grabbed her up in his arms.

"I thought I told you good-by yesterday," he said. "You should be in bed so early in the day."

"There was something I wanted to tell you, Mat," Mary explained, her habitual gayety fading into momentary earnestness.

"Well?"

"Mat, don't tell anybody about us—not until it's over."

"But why not?" Ponce asked. "I am to marry my Mary. I am proud. I want everybody to know."

"Three months is a long time," Mary reminded him. "Maybe you wouldn't be so proud then."

Mat Ponce laughed at that. Then the steamer's bell sounded the half hour.

"I must go," Mat explained hurriedly. "The captain 'll give me the deuce!"

But Mary clung to him, doubt clouding her eyes.

"Mat! When people tell you things about me, don't you believe it! Don't believe it!"

"Tell me things—about you? What *could* they tell?"

A harbor tug puffed up, ready to take a hand, if need be, as the fruit steamer prepared to move away from her berth. Mat glanced out at it, and then gave Mary a final quick hug.

"Wait for me, Mary!" he said.

"Forever!" Mary breathed.

And then he was gone. A voice boomed from the steamer's bridge. The hawsers were cast off. Somewhere in the bowels of the ship bells rang. The siren roared, and the vessel backed slowly out into the stream.

On the way back across the harbor, Mary's ferryboat passed close under the fruiter's stern. She searched the deck with her eyes in the vain hope of seeing Mateo again. Alone on the after deck, she watched the white ship move majestically out toward the open sea.

A huge lump was in her throat. The very gulls overhead seemed to be mourning the fruit steamer's departure. Then,

almost before she knew it, the ferryboat had stopped in its slip, and a deck hand was shouting at her to go ashore.

Instantly she was the Mary who was the idol and the despair of the men who worked on the wharves—as care-free as a sparrow, ready with flashing eye and biting tongue to retort to all such gentry.

"Huh!" she observed, as she appraised the deck hand. "Anybody'd think you owned this tub!"

And with that she danced away through the cabin and up the runway. It seemed as if she had forgotten Mateo Ponce.

On the street, at the head of the wharf, she met big Peter Kelly on his way to start his work of bossing the loading of the freighters that were tied up at the docks.

"Mat's gone," she said.

"So you got to hunt up a new beau, eh?" Kelly replied.

"You big Irish stiff!" was Mary's answer to that, as she stood off and scrutinized the big man from head to foot.

A man making such a comment would have been smashed to the ground; but Mary—well, Mary had a habit of getting away with things that would have been impossible to any one else.

Nearly all the longshoremen knew Mary Kolchak, and not a few of the crews of the freighters that came in from Europe, Australia, South America, and the Orient—from all the seven seas. Summer and winter, if the weather was not too boisterous, she was on hand at the docks, at noon, with a deep basket filled with sandwiches and candy, tobacco and pipes, gum and cigarettes.

Sometimes she sold every article in her basket. Sometimes she sold almost nothing; but whether business was good or not, she would clamber upon a pile of freight and watch the men work. In summer she often brought a ukulele with her, and she would sit and pluck at it and sing ditties that made the men grin.

Oh, how Mary could sing! She didn't have much of a voice, but she would look straight at you, and smile and smile, and sing her little song to you; and, before you knew it, you would be smiling back—and wondering where she lived.

It was a drab place to sit, on a crate or a bale or a stack of boxes, with straining, unlovely men hurrying back and forth with their loads, with donkey engines rattling and derrick booms creaking, and with

somebody continually swearing; but Mary Kolchak seemed to brighten the whole place with her gay-colored clothes, and her smile, and her little ditties about nothing at all.

It wasn't the business that attracted Mary, nor ships, nor their mysterious cargoes. It was nothing under the sun but the men. There were huskies from the Argentine, blond giants from Scandinavia, swarthy "wops" from Sicily, and a mob of Boston Irish. Some were perennial workers, drawing their pay regularly year in and year out. Others bobbed up out of nowhere, gave names that suited their fancies, worked for a few days, and disappeared again.

Some of these were adventurous wanderers, intent on tarrying only long enough to get money for grub. Others, furtive of eye, close of mouth, came to the wharves as if to hide from some pursuer, and then, as if fearful lest the pursuit were closing in, dropped out of sight as inexplicably as they had come.

II

THERE was the Swede, for instance. He called himself Nelson, but no one knew what his name really was.

Mary Kolchak was watching the propeller of a freighter that was moving away from the pier. She was fascinated by the tremendous suction caused by the whirling blades. She saw a board caught in the foam, watched it drawn slowly back toward the propeller, then saw it dive from sight, only to be whirled up again, shattered by the flailing blades.

Then, suddenly, she saw the Swede. He was swimming between the ship and the wharf. She was on the verge of shouting a warning to the men on the dock, when she saw the Swede deliberately go past the ladder that led down to the water and swim on beneath the wharf, glancing back furtively at the deck of the freighter.

Mary saw a line that was made fast to the wharf begin to tug. She knew that there was a dory at the other end of it. She knew, too, that the Swede had sought refuge in the little craft.

A moment later the police boat Watchman, cruising by, was hailed by some one aboard the freighter. The Watchman drew in close on the outer side of the big ship. Those on the wharf could not see what took place, but it was rumored that an injured man had been taken off. A moment

later the police boat started rushing toward the Atlantic Avenue docks.

Once again the freighter backed off, swung slowly out into the stream, and started away down the harbor.

Soon the men left the wharf—all except big Peter Kelly, the boss. Mary was hoping that he, too, would go, when a police sergeant with a detail of men appeared and demanded of him:

"Did you see a fellow sneak off that freighter just before she left?"

"Any particular kind of a lookin' feller?" Kelly asked. "Men have been goin' up and down that gangplank all day."

"A big Swede," the sergeant explained.

Kelly shook his head.

"No Swede came ashore. I been right at the foot of that plank for two hours straight."

"I guess they'll find him in that ship somewhere, if they look hard enough," the sergeant observed.

Nevertheless, he spoke a few words to the police, and for ten minutes the pier received a searching scrutiny. Everything large enough to hide a man was carefully investigated.

"Keep an eye out, will you?" the sergeant asked Kelly. "If you spot a strange Swede on the pier, tip us off. He got into a fight aboard the boat, and damned near killed a fellow—just sort of broke him to pieces. He's a dangerous brute. He's got an anchor and a star tattooed on his right shoulder."

"I'll keep an eye open," Kelly promised—and promptly forgot about it.

Fights were too common along the water front to merit Peter Kelly's notice; but that was one reason why Mary haunted the wharves. Fights and mysteries stirred her interest. She made it a point to be on hand whenever it seemed that a good scrap was imminent.

She had heard every word that the police sergeant said. When Kelly had been left alone again, she approached him.

"What was they fightin' about, Peter?" she inquired.

"For a wonder," he answered, putting his notebook into his pocket, "they wasn't fightin' over you."

"Even for an Irisher, you're fresh," Mary informed him.

And what could big Peter Kelly do but grin? Many a time he had broken up fights by seizing the husky combatants and

batting their heads together. Men obeyed his orders without question; but Mary—she recognized no authority.

Kelly left her standing on the wharf, and went back to the office, on the street. Mary waited only long enough for him to disappear. Then she stepped to the edge of the wharf and let herself carefully down the ladder until she could see into the partial darkness beneath.

She could make out the Swede sitting motionless in the dory. She waved at him, and beckoned to him to come toward her. She had uses for a man who could literally break another man to pieces in personal combat.

Somewhat nonplused, and with suspicion showing in his face, the Swede rowed carefully to the edge of the wharf. The moment the dory came under her, Mary stepped in and sat down in the stern.

"The cops are after you," she told the Swede in a stage whisper; "but I'll get you out of it."

The Swede beamed. At her direction he guided the dory silently along the wharves, and then struck boldly out into the harbor.

Mary studied his physique. Never had she seen such a play of muscles in human arms. The hands that gripped the oars were huge. The chest that showed behind the half open shirt seemed a yard wide. Surely, Mary commented inwardly, she could make use of this chap!

She guided him to a landing place. By the time they reached it, the Swede was completely at her disposal—so much so that when she asked suddenly: "Got any money?" he drew from under his shirt a small bag that had been suspended about his neck.

"Nine hundred," he stated complacently, and replaced the bag.

"Ow!" exclaimed Mary, pressing a hand to her forehead. "Who are you—Rocky-fellow in disguise?"

The grin disappeared from the Swede's face for a moment, as he considered the question. Then he replied suddenly:

"My name Nelson."

"What's your first name?"

He hesitated, frankly surprised by the query, then scowled pensively. Mary laughed outright.

"It's Carl," she said. "Ain't that as good as any? It's Carl Nelson."

The Swede grinned appreciatively.

"That's right—I Carl Nelson, sure!"

"Well, Carl, first thing you'll do is go to a store I know and get yourself some dry pants and a hat and coat. You let too many people see you in that rig, and the cops 'll get wind of it."

The Swede went into the store. When he appeared again, some fifteen minutes later, he was decked in his new raiment and held both his great hands behind him. He was grinning widely as he approached Mary.

"Which hand you want?" he inquired.

Mary brightened. She was not surprised, for it seemed to be the custom of her new-found friends to begin their relationship with presents. She slapped the left forearm, and was amazed at the hardness of it.

Nelson beamed, and handed her a package, which she proceeded immediately to open. She dropped the paper where she stood, and unfolded the many-colored garment inside. It was a scarf of unusual width.

"Carl!" she exclaimed in astonishment. "You hadn't ought to! That cost money! Nix!"

But she did not hand it back to him.

"From Sveden," Nelson explained, beaming. "Smuggle in by dis fellah." He jerked a thumb toward the store. "Dat's lak dey wear in Sveden."

So, togged in the bright new scarf, and with big Carl Nelson striding along beside her, Mary started home to Maverick Street. She was hugely pleased with both her new acquisitions—the scarf and the slave.

It pleased her to note the positive awe with which the loungers on the corners looked at Nelson. Leading the way through Maverick Square—that paradise of loafers—she slowed her pace, so that all might have ample time to take a good look at the gigantic Swede.

"D'you s'pose you could lick those bums?" Mary inquired.

Nelson grinned and stopped.

"Which?" he inquired, looking about the square at the various knots of youths and men.

"Oh, never mind!" she replied quickly. "I was just thinkin', that's all. I was just thinkin' that you could make life awful miserable for about eight of them hyenas at a time."

Mary showed Nelson where he could get a room. A day or two later, she presented

him to Peter Kelly, at the wharf, with the suggestion that a man with a build like that could be of use—a suggestion which Kelly immediately seconded.

Nelson's first job was loading pianos. Ordinarily, four big men attacked each heavy instrument and carried it between them. As luck would have it, the cases had to be put aboard a freighter in a spot where the derrick could not be used.

Nelson watched for a moment, and then brushed aside the three men with whom he was teamed. He whistled to Mary and made a little gesture with his hand, which said, in the sign language that everybody understands:

"Watch your Uncle Dudley!"

He seized a piano case, muscled it to the edge of the platform, and then, balancing it with one great hand, stepped down and backed under it, easing it up on the broad of his back. He tested its balance for a moment, and then heaved and walked off with it, up the gangplank and into the hold of the freighter.

Thereafter nobody seemed anxious to arouse the anger of Carl Nelson.

Kelly watched developments with a knowing eye. He noticed Nelson's increasing sense of proprietorship over Mary—the same manifestation that had prompted the girl to give their walking papers to several confident admirers.

"Well," Kelly commented to Mary one morning, "it didn't take you very long to forget young Mat Ponce—for which I'm thankful."

Mary glared at him.

"Thankful?" she repeated.

"Mat is a man. His father before him was a man. They're a deep water family—the whole line of 'em. They've nothin' in common with the likes of you."

Mary's eyes blazed. For a moment she stood her ground, on the verge of a hot reply; but then, without a word, she suddenly shrugged her shoulders, picked up her basket, and moved on.

III

THREE months had gone by, and the fruit steamer *La Plata* was expected daily, before Mary felt that the time was ripe for her to make use of Carl Nelson.

The newspapers printed various versions of the origin of the trouble in Maverick Square; but the fact of the matter is that Mary Kolchak brought it about.

She waited until she saw the gigantic Nelson swinging up the street from the wharf before she went into the square. Then she deliberately stopped in front of a mirror on a penny-in-the-slot machine, and began to powder her nose.

Two or three gangsters began to emit a flow of pungent comment and advice. Mary whirled and faced them.

"You're afraid to open your traps except when you're in a pack!" she jeered. "If I was a man, I'd break a couple o' your necks!"

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Nelson around the corner. Instantly she stepped forward, doubled a small fist, and cracked a sneering youth across the mouth. She followed the blow with another. Then, as the youth groped to seize her hands, she screamed.

"Carl!" she shrieked, and redoubled her fury.

Nelson broke into a trot. He seized the youth in one great hand. As he did so, half a dozen of the pack swarmed at his back. Mary tripped one as she slipped out of the way. Another leaped at Nelson and grabbed him about the neck. The big Swede reached up, took a firm hold on the encircling arms, tore their owner loose, and flung him to the pavement. Then, whirling, he faced the other gangsters, who had backed away against the building.

Lowering his head, Nelson rushed them. They endeavored to dodge, but he came too fast for them. He swept four of them between his arms, and, rushing on, smashed the full weight and strength of his shoulders into them; and, since there was a brick wall immediately behind them, the four gangsters dropped in a broken heap.

Nelson grabbed one more—evidently a champion of the lot—and received a sharp blow on the jaw, which cut his lip and redoubled his anger. He knocked the man flat with one sledgelike fist, and then, picking him up by the ankles, swung him like a flail and hurled him into the crowd of excited spectators.

That accounted for them all. Breathing hard, Nelson wiped the blood from his lip and glared at the circle of men. He stepped in one direction. The circle gave back at that point. He stopped, then moved in another direction; and there again the circle broke.

"Go home!" he ordered, brandishing his arm.

His hearers obediently withdrew to a safe distance.

"I guess," Mary observed, glancing at the fallen ones, and at those who were limping fearfully away, "that squares accounts with that bunch o' muckers! Carl," she said suddenly, "I hear a gong. It's the cops. Come on away!"

"Cops?" Nelson hunched his shoulders menacingly and looked about. "Where's the cops?"

Mary seized him by the arm, and tugged; but she might as well have taken hold of an office building. In exasperation, she let go, eyed him for a moment, and commented:

"All right! By all means, have it your own way!"

The gong clattered again—now just around the corner. Nelson grunted with satisfaction and anticipation, and rolled his sleeves a little higher. Mary darted away toward home.

There was but a brief story in the next morning's papers—merely a two-paragraph account of a riot in Maverick Square, and of a Swede named Nelson, who offered resistance to the police until a well timed crack with a nightstick unhorsed him.

Kelly was reading it when Mary appeared with her noonday basket.

"I'll bet," he commented, tapping the paper, "you put him up to that!"

She smiled brightly.

"Ain't you the grand little guesser?"

But Kelly scowled darkly.

"You're a fast worker," he announced; "but this trip you ain't goin' to get away with it."

"With what?" inquired Mary, eying him.

"With this," replied Kelly, pointing to an item in the column headed "Water Front News."

Mary read the report that Steward Mateo Ponce of the steamer *La Plata*, just arrived from southern ports, was to marry "one of the most unique and picturesque characters of the water front—little Miss Mary Kolchak." She gasped.

"He said he wouldn't tell anybody," she exclaimed, "and here he tells the world!"

She beamed up at Kelly, and extended a slender wrist with a bracelet of silver encircling it.

"He brought that from his father's country—Spain," she told Kelly. "That's handmade, too. They had to lug it over

the mountains on donkeys. What do you know 'bout that?"

"I suppose," Kelly remarked, "that you think he can keep supplyin' one or two such trinkets all the time, eh? You figure he gets pretty good wages, eh?"

Mary Kolchak eyed the Irishman, surprised by the hostility in his voice.

"What business is that of yours?" she inquired pointedly.

"I shipped for years on square-riggers with Mat Ponce's father, and I've known Mat since he was a bit of a lad."

"Then," Mary announced with a quirk, "you're in a pretty position to know that I'm a good picker!"

"Only this time you don't get away with it, Mary. Now mind—I got nothing against you. You can't help bein' what you are; but you ain't goin' to wreck Mat. Either you'll lay off him, or I'll tell him what sort you are—always makin' a fool of some man for what you can get out of him."

Mary's careless attitude was swept away. She made no reply. Apparently she was too much surprised to reply.

"S'pose I tell him about you and that young Murphy that went so far as to set up a flat for you, buy furniture, and make a date with a priest—and then you gave him the gate!"

"I wasn't more than seventeen," Mary declared excitedly. "You know I was just a kid! You knew what Murphy was—but you didn't say anything to me! I had to find out at the last minute; and it's lucky I did—with him in Charlestown prison now!"

"D'you s'pose Mat Ponce would want to marry somebody that had carried on with a critter like Murphy?" Kelly asked significantly.

Mary said nothing. For the first time that he could remember, Peter Kelly saw consternation in her face.

"Now listen, Mary," he said in a softer tone. "I don't have anything against you. I'm only thinkin' of Mat. Them fellers with Spanish blood is terrible earnest, you know; but you—you ain't got it in you to care about him or anybody else. All you want is a good time, and you think he makes enough money to furnish it. Mat don't look at things that way. He'd go all to pieces if he was to wake up to the fact that you're just usin' him for what you can get out of him. See here, Mary, you leave

him be, and I'll fix it so you can have more good times than two Mats could get for you. I'll fix it so you can work on them white boats that ply between here and New York, or the Provinces. You'd see the finest of people; you'd get travel like people pay big money to get; you'd get good wages and the finest of tips; you'd be always on the go—something doin' every minute. How about it?"

"Peter Kelly," Mary exclaimed finally, "when you say that I don't care about Mat, you're—you're crazy!"

"It looks like it, with that Swede at your heels as quick as Mat's boat gets out of sight, and still at your heels until the very day when she comes in again! It looks it!"

"That Swede!" Mary exclaimed. "I did him a good turn, and he knows it. It'll be a long time before he can pay me back for that. What's a fight to a hulk like him? And get this, Peter Kelly—the gang he smashed was the gang that laid for Mat and swiped his money last spring. I've just been waitin' for the chance to square up with 'em, and now I'm square!"

Kelly pursed his lips. He was by no means convinced.

"What would Nelson say if he heard that?" he inquired.

"He *can't* say anything," Mary announced, with a stamp of her small foot; "and neither can you!"

"Within an hour," Kelly told her quietly, "Mat Ponce is coming to see me. I telephoned him, and told him I had something to say to him—about you. That is my plain dooty."

Kelly left then, strolling down upon the wharf with his notebook in his hand. The loading of the freighter was done. Nothing was left but for the captain to make up his mind when he wanted to pull out into the stream; and that was to be very shortly.

Mary, with her basket by her side, was seated listlessly on a keg, leaning against a huge pile at the wharf edge, when Nelson appeared. He went straight to her, wearing a black scowl on his broad face. He had read the news about Mary and Mat Ponce. A fellow longshoreman had seen to that.

Mary looked startled at his approach.

"What happened to you?" she inquired. "Did they just fine you and turn you loose?"

Nelson nodded, and held out the article.

"What's dis?" he inquired.

"It looks like a newspaper," Mary replied quickly.

Nelson's eye caught the bracelet.

"Mat?" he inquired, pointing at it.

"From Spain," Mary replied, holding it up for him to see.

She seemed to think that she could quiet his perturbed spirits; but with lightning swiftness Nelson grabbed her wrist, wrenched off the bracelet, in spite of her struggles, and sent it spinning over the edge of the wharf.

The roar of the freighter's siren drowned Mary's shriek of consternation and pain. The big ship was slowly moving away from the dock.

Nelson seized the girl by the arms.

"You my girl now!" he declared thickly. "I fight for you! I pay fine for you! I find dis fellah, I kill him, an' you—maybe I kill you, too, if you don't be careful!"

Mary struggled, but she might as well have struggled against an elephant. The great fingers were bruising her arms where they gripped.

"Let go me!" she demanded. "Let go me! I told you to come away—you know it! Let go me, I tell you! I'll tell the police you're the fellow that smashed up that deck hand last May!"

Nelson's eyes flashed in mingled anger and fright. He released one hand to shake a finger at her.

"No damn voman can lie 'bout me!" he warned her.

Quick as a flash, Mary snatched at the sleeve of his shirt at the shoulder, and tore it away, baring an anchor and a star tattooed on his arm.

"Look!" she shouted frantically to the other men who were gathering about threateningly, though not daring to oppose the mighty Swede. "That's the mark the cops were lookin' for!"

Some one pushed through the circle of men and seized the huge arm that had clamped upon Mary.

"Get out o' here, Mat!" Mary screamed. "This big brute 'll—"

Nelson released her.

"Mat, huh?" he roared, and struck.

Ponce went down with a crash. Kelly shouted savagely at the Swede, and hurried for a club that lay some thirty feet distant; but Nelson snatched up the unconscious Ponce in his arms, hoisted him above his

head, and started at a trot toward the edge of the wharf.

The others seemed too stunned to move. Mary, sensing his purpose, shrieked and flung herself on his back; but the Swede did not even hesitate. Half a dozen strides brought him to the edge of the wharf, where the ship was backing away. Then he hurled Mateo straight down under the steamer's stern, where the propeller was churning the water to foam.

The body sank, then rose again, being drawn in slowly toward the propeller.

"Shut off your engines!" roared a dozen voices to the man on the freighter's bridge.

But the officer, intent on his work, merely glanced down at them questioningly. He had not seen Nelson's act. The roar of his siren had drowned the noise on the wharf.

Half a dozen men stripped off their coats; but to dive there was suicidal. It would mean facing death in that beating propeller.

Kelly rushed to the wharf edge, cupping his hand.

"Shut off your engines!" he yelled. "Man overboard!"

The body of Mateo Ponce floated closer to the whirling blades. Mary Kolchak screamed, then leaped. Mary could swim like a young eel. She struck out deliberately between Mat and the propeller.

Her body was caught in the suction. She reached out and thrust Ponce away; but the very move sent her closer to the beating blades. She struggled frantically, screamed, and sank.

Almost as she went under the surface, the freighter's engines stopped. Two big bodies flashed into the water. One man seized Ponce, who was still floundering feebly. The other dragged Mary to the foot of the ladder where she had slipped down months before to help Carl Nelson.

Nelson had been forgotten for the moment—that is, by all save Peter Kelly. As

the big Swede turned to rush from the wharf, Kelly blocked his path. Nelson charged. Kelly let him come, gauged the distance carefully, and sent him crashing to the wharf with a blow of the club.

They bound the giant and laid him in a corner out of the way.

It was Peter Kelly who took Mary from the man who handed her up from the ladder. Her lightness astonished him.

"Mat all right?" she asked.

"He's got a lump on his noodle, and the wind's knocked out of him," Kelly told her; "but he'll be fit in ten minutes."

"Let me down, Peter. I ain't the fainting kind."

"So I noticed; but I'm sending you home in a taxi."

Mary's eyes widened incredulously.

"A taxi?" she gasped.

"If chariots was to be hired, it would be a chariot I'd get," Kelly remarked, continuing to stride toward the wharf office with Mary in his arms.

Mateo Ponce was seated in the chief clerk's chair when Kelly brought Mary in. Nobody spoke as the boss set her down. He wagged his head significantly, and they slipped noiselessly out, leaving Mary and Mat alone.

It was Mateo who summoned Kelly back within the next few minutes.

"You sent for me," he said. "You wanted to say something to me—about Mary."

Kelly glanced at Mary. She was watching him anxiously, fearfully.

"That's so," Kelly admitted. "It was about Mary. I—let's see—well, she's terrible contrary, Mat, boy. You can depend on it, she'll always do just what you ain't expectin' her to do—every time!"

Mary promptly grabbed Peter Kelly about the neck and planted a kiss on his leathery cheek.

"And that," Kelly said, recovering from his surprise, "is a sample!"

A DREAM GARDEN

Do you ever dream of a garden

With flagstone paths

And a lily pond—

A garden with old-fashioned flowers and new?

Do you dream of a baby that prattles among them?

I do!

Sonia Ruthële Novák

The Girl Who Would Be Odd

SALLY KIRK'S ORIGINAL IDEAS ON SUCH TIMEWORN SUBJECTS
AS MATRIMONY AND THE TRAINING OF CHILDREN

By Katharine Brush

SALLY KIRK had devoted the first eighteen years of her life to the business of being just like other girls. Having achieved this aim, she had looked herself over quite carefully, made a wry face, and determined that from that day forward she would be as different from other girls as was humanly possible.

Now, at twenty-three, she was forever being pointed out to sight-seers from afar, along with the Woolworth Building, Grant's Tomb, and the Palisades.

"There's Sally Kirk — oh, you simply must meet Sally! Most original person! Says and does the *maddest* things!"

The things that Sally said and did were not really mad; they merely ran along lines somewhat oblique to the orthodox. They were unexpected, unsettling things. You could never anticipate them. You never knew, with Sally around, what might happen, or when, or how. You only knew that something would happen, and that it would be the one thing that nobody except Sally could possibly have thought of.

This was most refreshing. Indeed, there were numerous young men—whole squadrons and battalions of young men—who found it as refreshing as anything they had ever encountered, if not more so.

From among these numerous young men Sally at length selected two, with a view to marrying one or the other—or possibly both, for Sally's friends agreed that to see her marry two men and successfully conduct a connubial threesome would not in the least surprise them. The young men were Bill Bigelow, whom Sally liked "because he's bow-legged and not ashamed of it," and Lee Wainwright, whom any one would have liked for any number of reasons. Characteristically, Sally voted him down, and chose Mr. Bigelow.

The wedding invitations caused something of a ripple, even in a group accustomed to the idiosyncrasies of the bride-to-be. The ceremony was to take place at midnight on Friday, the 13th of July, on the sandy beach in front of Sally's summer home, and the participants and invited guests were to be arrayed in bathing suits.

Unfortunately for the assembled congregation—which included, in addition to invited guests, the entire populace of five towns, the feature writers from thirty newspapers, a small but lusty band of urchins, nine dogs, two cats, and a hurdy-gurdy man with a monkey—the wedding did not take place.

It very nearly took place. In fact, it is safe to say that it would have taken place had it not been for the minister, who suffered a most untimely attack of conscience. At the last minute he firmly refused to officiate. He spoke feelingly. He mentioned reverend and holy and sacred things, and also profane and indecent and sacrilegious things. He talked on and on, while the dogs barked, and the urchins cheered, and the rest of the throng listened silently.

In conclusion, he pointed to Sally, standing before him in a white bathing suit which looked, in the partial darkness, astoundingly like no bathing suit at all. Then he turned upon his heel, and from what he had referred to as "this ribald scene," went swiftly away, doubtless to compose an excellent sermon on the decadent morals of the age.

The invited guests, much disappointed, repaired to the house to discuss the burning question of what Sally would do next, and to partake of punch while discussing it. In the general confusion, Sally herself was lost sight of. Anon Mr. Bill Bigelow, the groom, instituted a search, which oc-

cupied several anxious hours and ended at seven o'clock in the morning, upon receipt of the following telegram:

Darling Billy, don't be angry, but Lee Wainwright and I skipped off from the rest of you and were married by a justice of peace at two o'clock this morning. Sorry if you're sorry, but after all I did try to marry you and couldn't, and, as you know, I don't believe in trying anything more than once.—SALLY.

Every one worked very hard to console Mr. Bigelow. They slapped him upon the back, and thrust tall glasses at him, and babbled things into his ears—things like this:

"You're lucky, old man, if you only knew it. Sally would make the hell of a wife. You ought to be glad. Anyway, she'll be divorced in a year from to-day, you wait and see!"

II

BUT Sally was not divorced in a year from that day. Instead, she was busily engaged in bearing a son. I say a son, because Sally had carefully explained to the doctor that if by any chance it proved to be other than a son, he was to take it right away and give it to somebody else.

Lee Wainwright spent the first anniversary of his marriage in a hospital waiting room, which somehow presented the effect of being much too small to hold him. He spent it, for the most part, alone. Now and then a crackling-white nurse would join him briefly, speak to him in a lullaby sort of a voice, and go away again. Once the doctor came in.

"Everything's fine," he said. "She's a little soldier. Won't have an anæsthetic—says she wants to know what's going on."

After this, Lee was much embarrassed to find himself weeping.

When he saw Sally again, she was lying on a high, narrow bed, looking, he thought, particularly lovely. Her gray eyes were wide, her cheeks ivory-pale, her hair a copper splash against the pillow.

She hailed him, Sallylike, thus:

"Pardon me for not running to meet you at the door, Lee, but I've had rather a hard day."

Later, when he had kissed her several times and blurted forth a few of the many things that welled up chokingly within him, she said:

"Sit down, my dear. We've got to talk over what we're going to do about this."

Lee sat down.

"Do about what?" he queried.

Sally eyed him with evident astonishment at his lack of comprehension.

"Why, didn't they tell you we drew *twin girls*?"

"Yes, of course, but—"

"Well, obviously," she went on, "something must be done. You didn't think I'd have twin girls around the house, did you?"

"I—I hadn't thought," confessed Lee, somewhat blankly.

"I can't stand girls," said Sally, "and you know it. Girls are three-quarters feline and the other quarter asinine. I'll be darned if I'll be a mamma to two of 'em!"

"Er—isn't it a little late now to reach that decision?" ventured Lee.

Sally heeded him not.

"Twin babies are bad enough," she ruminated, "and a girl baby is worse; but *twin girl babies*—thrust upon me—why, what was the Lord thinking of? I wanted a boy to play half back for Yale. I wanted to sit in the Bowl, twenty years from now, with a big bunch of violets pinned over my tummy, yelling like anything, while he went through the Harvard line as if it was paper—"

She broke off abruptly, and when she resumed speaking it was plain that the twins and all things thereunto appertaining had been momentarily dismissed from her mind.

"By the way, Lee, did you remember to write to the Taft and see if we can get rooms for the game this fall?"

"Yes," said Lee shortly, "and we can't. They're full up already. Let's not discuss that now, Sally. Where are—er—my children?"

"They're in the nursery down the hall," said Sally. "Haven't you seen them yet, for Heaven's sake?" She pressed the bell attached to the bed, and her nurse responded. "Miss Brown, show Mr. Wainwright the litter," she ordered cheerfully.

Miss Brown scurried away, snorting "*Litter!*" *sotto voce* as she went, and Sally again addressed Lee:

"Prepare yourself for a shock, darling. When I first saw them, I said to the doctor, 'Quit kidding me! I'm beautiful, and my husband's not half bad, and you needn't try to tell me that any such things as *those* belong to us!' It does seem highly improbable, really."

The nurse returned, bearing a roll of

blanket on each arm, and Lee was introduced to his daughters. The meeting was rather a stiff affair, as meetings must always be between a gentleman who is in a sort of daze and two ladies who are fast asleep. Lee examined the wee faces curiously for a long moment. Then he touched one with a gentle, fearsome forefinger, as if to convince himself that it was genuine.

Sally watched him.

"What do you think of them?" she asked at last. "Aren't they weird? They have pink hair, and no noses."

"I think they're kind of cute," said Lee.

"You're a liar!" said Sally.

III

THE Wainwright twins were generally conceded to be their amazing mother's *chef-d'œuvre*.

"Wouldn't you just know she'd do something like that?" cried Sally's friends.

There were countless callers. They presented themselves at the hospital with something of the air of people flocking into a Jolson *matinée*—that gala air of pleasant expectation, that here-to-be-amused air; nor were they ever disappointed. They invariably emerged twittering like robins, and exchanging some such ecstatic comments as—

"Isn't she *rich*? Have you ever known anything to *equal* it? To see her with those babies—and to hear the things she *says*! Oh, my dear, I tell you I thought I should die!"

There were also countless gifts—small jackets, small shoes, small dresses, small bonnets, all white and blue or white and pink.

"Of course I shan't use any of them," said Sally to her nurse. "These babies are always going to be dressed in lavender and Nile green."

"But lavender and Nile green aren't baby colors!" expostulated Miss Brown. Even after a week of Sally, she was not beyond the shocking point. "I have never seen a baby—a little tiny new baby—in lavender or Nile green!"

"Neither have I," agreed Sally, "and it's high time we both did."

Lee accepted the announcement of this strange sartorial plan without protest. Another and a more vital matter was engaging his attention at the moment.

"Look here, Sally," he said, "we've got to get to work and think up some names

for these kids. What are we going to call them?"

"Mike and Ike," replied Sally promptly.

"Now be serious!"

"I *am* serious. Mike and Ike, they look alike—why not, Lee? Those are good names, and different; and I've been calling them that for a week now, and they're used to it."

Lee regarded her sternly.

"Do you mean to tell me," he demanded, "that just for the sake of keeping up your reputation for doing queer things you would burden a girl child with a name like Mike, or Ike, and make her carry it through life with her?"

"Well," said Sally, "it ought to be something like that— Something that rimes. How about Dot and Tot—do you like that any better, Lee?"

"Personally," said Lee, not deigning to notice this, "I think Mary and Elizabeth are pretty names for girls."

"Yes—you *would* choose Mary and Elizabeth!" jeered Sally. "Honestly, Lee, you depress me sometimes, you're so unoriginal. You simply have no imagination, no vision, no romance. There's a bit of poetry that reminds me of you—'A primrose by the river's brim a yellow primrose was to him, and it was nothing more'—only you're worse. A primrose by the river's brim wouldn't even be a yellow primrose to you, unless somebody pointed to it and announced firmly. 'That, Lee, is a yellow primrose.' Otherwise, it would just be a weed."

"Now what brought all this on?" inquired Lee piteously. "I only said that Mary and Elizabeth—"

Sally interrupted him.

"Wait! I've thought of something!"

"I suppose it's Willy and Nilly, or Mouse and Louse!"

"No, but why don't we name them Sally and Lee, after ourselves? Don't you think that's a rather nice idea?"

"Lee is not a girl's name," objected Lee. "And besides—"

"Well, what if it isn't?"

"And besides, supposing, when they get older, I come into the house and yell 'Sally,' or you come into the house and yell 'Lee'—how are any of us going to know who's wanted?"

"But the twins won't be in the same house with us," said Sally matter-of-factly.

"What?"

"I say that the twins won't be in the same house with us."

"Why won't they?" asked Lee, surprised. "Where else would our twins be? What are you talking about, anyway, Sally?"

"Our twins," said Sally deliberately, "will be in an apartment at least three blocks away, with a competent cook to get their meals and a trained nurse to take care of them."

"My God!" said Lee.

"I told you that," Sally continued. "I told you the day they were born that I didn't intend to have them around my house. I thought you understood that I really meant it."

"Of course I didn't! Great jumping goldfish, who ever heard of such a thing?"

"Nobody. That's one of its chief advantages—it's such a novelty."

Lee sprang up and began to stride about the little room, kicking savagely at a chair and a table as he passed.

"If you don't stop," he said in an awful voice—"if you don't stop doing insane, idiotic, crazy things because they're novel—"

"On the other hand," broke in Sally evenly, "look at it this way—if I had never done insane, idiotic, crazy things because they're novel, I wouldn't be married to you now. I'd have married Bill Bigelow, as every one expected."

This was undeniable; and Sally was not the kind of a girl to whom you could say, "Well, I wish to goodness you had!" and make it sound convincing. Lee took a new tack.

"But, Sally, this is different," he pleaded. "It's selfish of you!"

Sally opened her gray eyes very wide.

"Why, Lee Wainwright, it is not! It's most unselfish, as a matter of fact. It's for their own good. They'll be better off over there. They'll have better care. There won't be any noise to disturb their sleep, or anybody to spoil them. Besides," she added naively, "I shall see them every so often."

Lee looked much, but said nothing.

"All my life," continued Sally, "I've gone to the houses of people with babies, and here's what happens—you walk in, trip over a toy engine, and sprawl headlong. Pulling yourself together, you sink into a chair, only to rise again hastily and remove three blocks, six nails, a mechanical

duck, and 'The Tale of Peter Rabbit' from beneath you. After that you sit for an hour exchanging pleasantries with your hostess, while her offspring caresses your gown with jammy fingers and says, 'Who are you? Who are you? Who are you?' one million and twenty times. You depart with chewing gum on the soles of your shoes and infanticide in your heart. Well, there's going to be no such arrangement in my house. I won't permit it. If we'd had just one child, we might have managed to get around it by building a padded cell for a playroom; but with *two*—"

Sally paused for breath.

"And here's another thing, Lee—children are women's work, just as business is men's. When you come home at night, you can drop your business entirely. You can leave it at the office and not worry about it. Then why shouldn't I be able to leave *my* business in an apartment three blocks away, and drop it, and not worry about it? That's fair enough, isn't it? It's what I'm going to do, Lee, no matter what you say."

IV

WHAT Lee said, and what he continued to say at intervals for the next two weeks, is no affair of yours or mine, and has no bearing on this story, anyhow, since it got him, in the end, exactly nowhere. Arguing with Sally was like that. It was a futile and a foolish thing, comparable to swimming in mid ocean with no boat in sight and no life preserver. One might better sink at once and have it over with.

Suffice it to state, therefore, that the house of Wainwright became in due time a house divided. The first division was an apartment in the East Sixty-Somethings, where dwelt Mr. and Mrs. Wainwright, quite as they had dwelt before. The second division was another apartment, not far away, in which, at any hour of the day or night, there might be found one howling twin, one sleeping twin—they howled and slept in shifts—and one haggard young woman, scarcely recognizable as the same Miss Brown who had once enjoyed at least an occasional nap while attending Mrs. Wainwright at the hospital.

Making victory utterly complete, the twins were baptized Sally and Lee, and thereafter were called Mike and Ike by all who knew them intimately. As to which was Mike and which Ike, there were fre-

quent and furious debates. Sally always claimed that she could tell. She said that Mike was the spittiest; but as both were most remarkably spitty, this was voted an untrustworthy means of identification. Miss Brown, who knew them apart, was instructed to dress Mike in lavender and Ike in Nile green, so that others might know also; but sometimes, in her haste, she mixed the signals.

Later, distinguishing them was not so difficult. The one who crawled on hands and knees was Mike, and the one who got about in a sitting posture, painful to the beholder but eminently satisfactory to herself, was Ike. Sally preferred Ike.

"She's like me," she told Lee. "She's different. No common or garden variety of crawl for her!"

"Mike gets there faster, though," Lee countered loyally.

The twins grew apace. They learned to walk and to talk, and to eat soft-boiled egg from the tip of an urgent spoon. They became pretty, rosy, and fat. They laughed a great deal, revealing little white seeds of teeth with scalloped edges. Lee viewed them with enormous pride, but if Sally shared his parental enthusiasm she gave no sign. Her attitude was still rather that of an innocent bystander. She seemed, as some one put it, "interested, but not convinced."

Lee constantly tried to convince her. He would talk of the twins by the hour, always in superlatives, and always with an argumentative note in his voice, as if he half expected contradiction.

"They're so cute, Sally!" he said one day. "You have no idea how cute they are! Why, just last evening, Mike said the cutest thing! What do you suppose she said? I was putting my overcoat on, and she said, 'Dada put coat on—go by-by.' Now what do you think of that, for a kid as young as she is?"

"It sounds intelligent," said Sally.

"Intelligent! Why, say, it's absolutely marvelous! Miss Brown swears she never in her life saw children whose minds were as quick as theirs. I tell you, Sally, you have no idea—"

"Don't say that again!" Sally cut in. "Of course I have an idea! I go to see them every day, don't I?"

There was a pause.

"I'm sure I don't know when you go," Lee observed presently. "You're never up

and dressed until ten in the morning, and Miss Brown tells me that the little nurse girl who takes the kids out comes at a quarter past ten. They are out until noon, and then they sleep until two, and from two to four they're out again. I'm with them from half past four until they go to sleep at six, and you're never there then. When *do* you go to see them, Sally?"

"I'm always there just before they start off at a quarter past ten," Sally told him. "The little nurse girl and I arrive at about the same time every morning."

"That reminds me," said Lee. "How about that nurse girl? Are you sure she's reliable? She wouldn't get absorbed in a flirtation with some cop in the park, and let Mike and Ike run away, would she?"

Sally's face twitched ever so slightly.

"I doubt it very much," she answered. "She's not the flirting kind—that is, I hardly think a cop would interest her. She comes from a very fine family, Lee, and she's—er—a nice little thing. She's devoted to the twins, and so are they to her. They call her"—Sally smiled—"they call her 'dearest.' That's ridiculous, of course, but isn't it cunning?"

V

NOT more than a week after this conversation Lee received a summons. It came at half past nine o'clock, one morning, and ran as follows:

"Boss wants to see you right away, Mr. Wainwright!"

Boss saw Mr. Wainwright right away. When he had finished seeing Mr. Wainwright, it was five minutes past ten, and Mr. Wainwright was, to all appearances, a changed man. He had a shining morning face, and he walked as the gentlemen walk in the rubber heel advertisements. He almost bounded.

Departing in haste from the office, he embarked in a taxicab.

"Seven past ten," he muttered, examining his watch. "Sally'll be at the kids' apartment about now. She said she always saw them before they went out in the morning. I'll go there!"

He went there.

As he drew up at the curb, he observed his daughters toddling along the sidewalk ahead of him. One was a pale green speck, the other a pale lavender speck, and both clung to the hands of a nursemaid in a neat gray cloak and hat.

"Hello, Mike and Ike!" Lee called after them gayly. "Come see daddy!"

The specks simultaneously right-about-faced, emitting small squeals indicative of pleasure and excitement. The nursemaid did not right-about-face. She appeared bent upon going on about her business and taking the specks along with her.

There were signs of altercation. Mike tugged at the nursemaid's hand like a puppy at a leash. Ike kicked her on the point of a shapely ankle.

"See dada, deewist!" pleaded both twins.

The maid refusing to yield, Mike seated herself on the sidewalk and resolutely declined to budge, while Ike broadcasted her righteous rage to all Manhattan.

Lee reached the scene a moment later, set Mike upon her feet, patted Ike, and turned to the nursemaid, who still stood with her back toward him.

"Look here, my girl!" he said. "I want it plainly understood that these children must be allowed to come and kiss their father whenever they feel like it."

"Yes, sir," said a muffled feminine voice.

"Didn't you know I was their father?"

"I—I had reason to believe that you were, sir."

"Then why did you prevent them?"

"I was in a hurry to go on, sir. I had a date with a cop in the park, sir."

"You—" began Lee. Then he added sharply: "Turn around here!"

The nursemaid turned around.

"Say it!" she directed. "I know just what you're going to say. First you're going to call upon the Deity. Then you're going to shout, 'Sally! You?' To which I shall reply calmly. 'Lee, I,' and that 'll be that."

But it wasn't. There was much more. Lee had to ask the whys and wherefores, and Sally had to answer in detail.

"Well, you know me, Lee. You know how I hate the *usual* thing. I've always made fun of these doting mothers, and vowed I'd never be one. Then, when I felt myself slipping, and becoming one in spite of myself, I vowed that nobody should know it, anyway; and nobody does—except Miss Brown. Of course, she had to be in on it, but every one else thinks ten minutes every morning is all the time I give my daughters, when as a matter of fact I spend most of every day camouflaged in this uniform and these blue glasses, getting acquainted with them." She glanced down at Mike and Ike. "And just between you and me, Lee," she added confidentially, "I think they are simply magnificent; but please don't tell a soul that I said so!"

And then Lee had to hug her on the spot. And after that he had to tell her what he had left the office for the purpose of telling her—that he was now a junior partner in the firm, and also that he was to be sent to California next week on a business trip lasting two months.

"And you're going with me," he finished gleefully.

"Next week!" Sally reflected. "I'm not sure I can get ready to go by next week. New clothes for Mike and Ike—"

"Mike and Ike?" echoed Lee, puzzled.

Sally gazed at him reproachfully.

"Lee Wainwright, you don't think I'd go away for two whole months and not take Mike and Ike, do you?"

Which was at once the most surprising and the most delightful thing that Lee had ever heard her say.

THE JESTER

My love is a jester; the critics sigh—

With never a serious, staid reply;

With never a solemn thought to voice,

But ever my heart is proud of its choice.

For the king must bide in his palace walls,

But the jester may go where his fancy calls.

My love is a jester, the critics say—

But he laughed as he pilfered my heart away;

Oh, the crown of a king is heavy with gold,

But a jester's cap is easy to hold.

And his bells make merry, his smile makes gay,

And bright is the sun on the jester's way.

L. Mitchell Thornton

Scraps of Paper

THE STORY OF MR. PARSILL, A BACHELOR WHO HAD PECCADILLOS, AND NOURSE, THE PERFECT VALET

By Rufus King

THE envelope was blue—not a commonplace blue, but a tone that is offered by cornflowers on a sunny day. From it there emanated a delicate perfume. Mr. Parsill could not quite define the scent, but then there was little of anything about the sender that he could define. All he really knew of her was that she was an exceptional woman, with a bisque complexion, flame-colored hair, and leaning toward black velvet gowns.

Mr. Parsill's feminine reliefs—it was impossible to put them in ordinary niches—were invariably exceptional. During the latter thirty of his fifty odd years he had somehow contrived to convince himself that the latest was ever a bit more exceptional than the one before.

He slit the envelope and read the letter. Scraps of it pelted against his brain like the petals of a hothouse rose, possessing, as they did, what he was in the mood to consider a sophisticated contour of beauty:

Driving homeward through the park, the night sky seeped its rare charm through the veil of the city, offering a hint of something exquisite, as through a glass darkly. I found it irritating—making me want innumerable things—

When he got that far, Mr. Parsill frowned. Mrs. Carstairs had a disturbing habit, which manifested itself all too frequently, of wanting innumerable things. He had more than often wondered why her husband didn't provide her with them.

Such as perfection, understanding—

The frown cleared. This plunge on Mrs. Carstairs' part into the abstract was a decided bend toward the better. The letter flowed on, and the rose petals continued to pelt. He came serenely to the signature—"Janice."

The entrance of his valet, Nourse, into

the library dragged him from Mrs. Carstairs' roses with a thump.

"Well?" he said, tearing the letter into very small pieces and dropping them into the wastebasket.

"The car is at the door, sir," said Nourse.

Mr. Parsill stood up. He carried himself with an air. His figure could best be classed as "trim," and it was pleasantly set off by the powder-toned suit that he had donned as a greeting to spring. Taking his hat, stick, and gloves from Nourse, he paused for an instant before a glass, to assure himself that his *boutonnière* of one perfect gardenia was doing its duty like a gentleman. Then he entered the hall and made his way to the stoop.

At the curb was his motor—a smart, conservatively rakish car of foreign make. He entered it, and, without orders, Jennings, his chauffeur, started the customary drive around Central Park and along the river.

Mr. Parsill preferred this form of outing to a constitutional. It was far less strenuous, and he felt that it was equally beneficial to his health, as well as to the color of his cheeks. Not that he personally cared a rap about the color of his cheeks, as he didn't have to look at them, but the ladies, bless them, were much interested in their healthy, ruddy condition.

The trees, leafed tentatively in pale green, swept by. The river opened its silver surface for his view. Life, he decided, was good. As Mrs. Carstairs had said in her extraordinary letter:

Completion—to be drenched with it—the essence, the core of living—

Had she said "core"? He rather thought not; but if she hadn't said that, what had she said? It was stupid of him

not to remember. It was unfortunate, too, for they had a habit of rehashing their written thoughts—"untrammelled," they called them—whenever they met after an exchange of letters. The fact that the thoughts had previously appeared in ink gave a mild sort of ethical sanction to the more personal ones. Mr. Parsill decided to retrieve the scraps of the letter and piece them together.

On reaching his home, Mr. Parsill went at once to the library. It was empty. The scraps of blue paper, in deference to the laws of stability, should still be reposing on top of the other scraps that had composed the morning's mail. He went to the wastebasket, lifted it to the top of the desk, and peered in.

They were gone. There were plenty of scraps of white paper, but none of blue.

Mr. Parsill, who hated triteness as futilely as any of the *intelligentsia*, found himself on the very edge of being unable to believe his eyes. He immediately reversed his recent decision concerning life. It was not good. Some one in his household had betrayed him. A fine rage gave his cheeks a color which the ladies, had they been present to view it, would undoubtedly have admired tremendously.

Then he began to wonder—who? It could have been Nourse, the maid, or the butler—yes, even the cook or the house boy; but which was the scoundrel? Furthermore—ghastly thought!—for how long had this letter snatching business been going on? The walls of the library, though they were quite competent to do so, refused to tell him. And why should any one steal his letters? The answer to that was uncomfortably easy—blackmail.

He put the basket back upon the floor and walked to the door. On the threshold was a single scrap of blue paper. He pounced upon it. It contained four written characters—"fron." Obviously the trail of the thief had passed that way; but whither had it gone—upstairs or down? No further scrap of blue paper was there to inform him. It was a clever thief, but Mr. Parsill made up his mind, with a fine and well heated frenzy, to be cleverer.

He would, and did, prepare a trap.

II

"NOURSE," said Mr. Parsill on the following morning, "I am spending the weekend out of town."

"When do we start, sir?"

"I am going alone."

"Yes, sir—by motor?"

Mr. Parsill tore the last of his mail to shreds and casually dropped them into the wastebasket.

"By motor," he said.

"At what hour will you leave, sir?"

"As soon as the bags and the car are ready."

"I will attend to it at once, sir."

Mr. Parsill entombed a murmured, "Thank you, Nourse," in an enigmatic smile. Fifteen minutes later the valet accompanied him to the motor waiting beside the curb. It already contained the bags.

"Tuxedo," said Mr. Parsill. "Mrs. Harrington Blythe's."

"Tuxedo," repeated Nourse to Jennings. "Mrs. Harrington Blythe's."

The motor slipped down the street. Three blocks sped past, and a fourth. Mr. Parsill disengaged himself from a rug and leaned forward. He tapped Jennings upon the shoulder. The car swam to the curb, and stopped.

"Sir?" said Jennings.

"Take the car and my bags to the station, Jennings. I have decided to go by train. Stay there until I come. I intend walking the rest of the way. The air," Mr. Parsill explained, sniffing sketchily at it, as if to capture some quality that had suddenly become remarkable, "is peculiarly appealing this morning."

"Very good, sir," said Jennings, jumping to the road and opening the door.

Mr. Parsill stepped down, smiled faintly at Jennings, looked through him, and vanished around the corner.

"The air!" muttered Jennings, as he recaptured the wheel and headed the car toward the railroad station. "Your grandmother! I wonder what the old Valentino's up to now!"

With a smile of grim and not entirely unpleasant anticipation, Mr. Parsill returned to his house and let himself quietly in with a latchkey. The library door was closed. He stared speculatively at its dull panels, much as a woman is reputed to stare at an envelope before she inspects its contents. Then he opened the door.

"Ah, Nourse!" he said calmly. "Ah! Just so!"

His eyes watched the thin torso of Nourse straighten sharply up behind the flat surface of the desk, the top of which

was patterned with innumerable scraps of paper arranged like flakes of snow upon its cool mahogany.

"You are sitting," he continued, still calmly, "in my chair."

"Yes, sir," said Nourse, and settled himself more firmly within the chair's capacious depths.

Mr. Parsill's frequently admired eyebrows became Roman arches. An "Ahem!" sought a difficult exit from his throat, and the ruddy color of his cheeks became a shade overdone.

"In spite of the fact I am in the room," he added.

Small muscles twitched just before the lobes of Nourse's prominent ears.

"There's a certain advantage to be gained, sir, when one is sitting down and one's adversary is standing," he said, with a calmness that matched Mr. Parsill's own.

Mr. Parsill had thought so himself. He lowered the lids of his eyes once and then raised them again, having painted on their surfaces, in the interim, a different scene. The eyes were harder, and seemed glazed with a conservative sheeting of ice. He corrected the inequality of the position by himself seeking a chair and sitting down in it.

"So you are a thief!" he said coldly.

"Yes, sir?" said Nourse, and with an equal arching of his eyebrows the valet silently asked Mr. Parsill what he was going to do about it.

His employer almost too eagerly accepted the challenge.

"I am going to send you to jail."

"No," said Nourse. "No!"

There was almost a soothing quality in the two negatives—soothing, at least, to Nourse. Mr. Parsill personally found it rather distasteful.

"Is there any reason why I should not?" he demanded, lowering the temperature of his voice another degree.

"One or two, sir," Nourse stated.

Mr. Parsill trimmed his sails for a tack.

"How long have you been with me, Nourse?" he asked.

"For seventeen years, sir."

"And for how long have you been in the habit of going through my mail?"

"For seventeen years, sir."

Mr. Parsill swallowed the statement as if it were a drop of liquid fire.

"So you were a scoundrel, Nourse, when you first came into my employ!"

"Oh, no, sir—not at all! I was a very honorable man."

"Impossible!" insisted Mr. Parsill. "Any one would imagine you were implying that I made you one."

"Correctly, sir."

Mr. Parsill chased his breath and caught up with it.

"I!" he said, giving to the pronoun the color of livid purple. "I? Are you accusing me of being a scoundrel?"

"Not a legal scoundrel, sir."

"Mad!" murmured Mr. Parsill to himself. "The man is quite mad!"

In a louder tone he demanded an unequivocal explanation.

"Well, sir," said Nourse, giving it, "both of us have our failing, you and I. Mine is curiosity; yours, a number of trifling mannerisms which, being your personal servant, I am forced through propinquity to endure. The very manner you have of opening your mail—I noticed it the first morning, sir—was too tempting."

Nourse spread his thin hands and smiled deprecatingly. Mr. Parsill's eyes became perfect circles.

"I tempted you by the manner in which I opened my mail?"

"Yes, sir. At first it was only curiosity—to check up as to whether or not my surmises had been correct—that led me to gather the scraps you threw into the wastebasket and piece them together again. I wanted to see if I had read your expression correctly."

"And had you?" demanded Mr. Parsill, in a voice that had dropped below freezing point.

"Invariably, sir. Permit me to offer a few examples."

Mr. Parsill transmuted the desired permission into a hectic demand.

"Well, sir," said Nourse, "let us assume that you are now reading a letter. There is no expression on your face whatsoever."

"Impossible!" insisted Mr. Parsill.

"You complete the letter, tear it once in half, and throw it into the basket. I gather that it is of negligible importance, perhaps an advertisement, and I would never bother about piecing it again."

"Naturally not," agreed Mr. Parsill coldly.

"No, sir. Then let us say that you are reading another letter. You frown, pucker your lips—"

"I never pucker my lips."

"Pucker your lips, skip hastily through the sentences, tear the paper into three or four pieces, and throw it into the basket, first having jotted down a memorandum on a pad. That will be an invitation to some subscription affair that you intend to decline. Still, you note, sir, there has been no letter of importance."

Mr. Parsill, in silence, noted.

"Then, sir, one day there was a letter that you read through twice. You tore it into fairly small bits. That was an interesting letter, sir."

"Oh, was it?" said Mr. Parsill grimly.

"Yes, sir—an appeal for funds from your poor cousin, Miss Alicia. You gave me a hundred-dollar bill to take down to her. It was very touching." Nourse wiped an eye. "It rather reformed me, sir."

"Reformed you?"

"Yes. For two months afterward I restrained myself from observing you during your mail, sir."

"I see!" said Mr. Parsill. "Then at the rate of fifty dollars per month bestowed upon poor relations I should, I presume, have been immune?"

"Perhaps, sir, but I dare say not. Shall I go on?"

"You'd better," said Mr. Parsill.

"There came letters during the reading of which you would mutter under your breath. Perhaps you were swearing, sir. These you would tear up quite fine. I found them most interesting."

"Oh!" said Mr. Parsill, and trusted himself no further.

"They were from women, sir—the kind—"

"Don't say it, Nourse!"

"The kind," continued Nourse, saying it, "that men forget."

"That," stated Mr. Parsill, "is a mistake, for they won't let men forget them. I wish they would!"

"Just so, sir. Now the letters that aroused my curiosity most of all were the ones over which you would simply sit quite still and frown. These, sir, you would tear into the finest of bits before throwing them into the basket. It would take me anywhere from two to three hours to put them together again."

"Would it really?" said Mr. Parsill in a choking sort of a voice. "Well, well!"

"Even four hours, at times; but they were worth it!"

Mr. Parsill opened his mouth, and, find-

ing nothing coming out of it except a faint plashing noise, promptly closed it again.

"You will perhaps recollect, sir, the recent one on the blue note paper?"

"You know damned well I do!" roared Mr. Parsill in a whisper. "How much do you want for it?"

Nourse looked a bit wounded.

"Want for it?" he repeated.

Mr. Parsill nodded his head up and down while he calculated, with the connivance of his mind's eye, the amount of his bank balance. The wretch would ask at least a thousand, or possibly two; but it would be worth it. He would pay Nourse his hush money, sack him, kick him, and lead his own life—so far as tearing up letters was concerned—more circumspcctly.

"Surely, sir," said Nourse, "you don't think I kept it!"

"You didn't keep it?" Mr. Parsill bent his full forces upon Nourse's astonishing statement. "What did you do with it?"

"Destroyed it, sir, because it was incomplete. A part of a word was missing. The first three letters were 'saf,' but I couldn't complete it. 'Safe'—'safety'—it was most annoying, for no word I could think of would do."

Mr. Parsill, with a feeling of blessed security that had been absent for twenty-four hours, breathed deep. He determined upon two kicks instead of one.

"That was really very decent of you, Nourse," he said frostily, and prepared to launch into a tirade that would serve as a suitable prelude for the duplex kick.

"Oh, it wasn't a question of decency, sir. You see, there was that other letter—one of much greater interest."

The room whirled majestically before Mr. Parsill's extended eyes, even though, as he assured himself by gripping the seat of his chair, he was sitting quite still. A choking sound came from his lips, indistinctly resolving itself into the words:

"Other letter?"

He remembered no other letter, certainly none that ranked in value with the one on the blue note paper; but there had been one, according to Nourse—a worse one—

"I dare say it's slipped your mind, sir."

"From whom?"

"The letter?"

"Yes—who sent it to me?"

"Why, no one, sir."

It was now himself, Mr. Parsill decided, who had gone mad. He pressed a hand to

his brow and fancied it, correctly, to be feverish.

"Do you know what you are talking about?" he asked thickly.

"Quite well, sir. The letter was from yourself."

A displeasing abyss cracked beneath Mr. Parsill's chilling feet.

"One I had written myself?" he said dazedly.

"Yes, sir. You would frequently tear up letters you had written yourself and do them over again."

The fact was undeniably true; but which, in the name of the seven Jezebels of the pit, was the one that Nourse had decided to keep? A fog of tormenting doubts seeped around Mr. Parsill like a shroud. Was there to be no release, he wondered hotly, from this net that his own carelessness had tossed upon him?

"To whom was the letter addressed, Nourse?" he was able, at last, to ask.

"The one before the present one, sir."

That, Mr. Parsill decided, suppressing a start, would be Mrs. Wiggins. Could the letter—how fervently he hoped that it couldn't!—have been the one in which he had compared her to a *svelte* gladiolus, a blaze of beauty sheathed in bronze? The letter was priceless, not for the value of its contents, but for a chance to suppress such nonsense.

"Your price," he demanded. "Name your price!"

"That you will reform, sir."

"Reform?"

"Oh, I don't mean that you must give up your—well, your peccadillos, sir; rather that you must change some of your habits. I really believe I shan't be able to endure them much longer. It's your outlook upon the smaller details of life that irritates me, sir. Think of the things that I'm daily forced to face—the way you run your fingers through your hair when you wake up, sir—lingering like; your feeling the blankets each night to see if they're damp; the automatic clearing of your throat—"

"We will soon remedy that," said Mr. Parsill thickly, mentally increasing the number of the proposed kicks—always dependent upon his agility and the comparative agility of his target—to three.

"I was rather hoping that we could, sir—that you would give a few of them up. It will make it so very much pleasanter here for me in the future!"

Mr. Parsill, who had been missing on seven cylinders, now missed upon all eight. A series of "H-h-h's" escaped from his lips like a gentle steam.

"Yes, sir," said Nourse quietly. "Here."

The steam solidified into clouds charged with thunder.

"Then the price for the letter, Nourse, is that I keep you on in my employ?"

Nourse sighed gently.

"You still do me an injustice, sir," he said.

He drew from an inner pocket of his coat a sheet of stiff paper, on which were pasted, again in their proper order, the small shreds of a letter. He handed it to Mr. Parsill.

"Here is the letter, sir. Perhaps you will burn it now. It would have been better to do so before."

III

MR. PARSILL read the patched note with heavy eyes. It was all there—the gladiolus and everything. What an audacious, shallow-pated trollope the extravagant lady had been and still was, for all that he knew! And what excellent material the note would be for her husband, had he been desirous of a divorce! Mr. Parsill had thought so at the time of writing it—which was, as he now recollected, his reason for tearing it up and doing it all over again.

He rose from his chair, crossed to the hearth, applied a match to the sheet of paper, and stood watching until it curled into a crisp ash, which he methodically ground to powder with the toe of his shoe. Then he returned to the chair and sat down. The curious sense of unreality that had been embracing him for the past quarter of an hour was deepened, rather than having been dispelled.

"You will leave the house at once, Nourse," he said.

"Yes, sir—if you wish."

"Wish? Would you expect me to wish anything else?"

"You're getting old, sir, and so am I; and we've been together for seventeen years. You haven't very much that's stable about you—except those, and the box of mementos in your dresser drawer."

With a slender finger Nourse indicated the framed photographs that formed a small gallery upon the walls—young women and old, young men and old, in costumes of the eighties and of to-day.

"Just memories in black and white," he said. "I'm the only thing you possess that's real, and that has lasted for more than a decade. We suit each other, sir, in spite of a few irritations. Why should either of us change, for the brief years that are left?"

Mr. Parsill dragged his lingering eyes from the photographs upon the walls and fastened them on Nourse—on Nourse, who had served for so long as a dependable background on which to draw the transient sketches of his existence. Why, in common sense, should they change? Nourse would have had his lesson, and he himself would have had his lesson. He would burn his letters, and thus stop putting temptation in Nourse's way. There really was no necessity for him to run his fingers through his hair when he woke up, and the blankets were invariably dry.

Then, too, any other man whom he might get to do for him if Nourse were gone would assuredly be an object of constant suspicion, and would have to be broken in to his ways—yes, his little ways.

"God bless me, Nourse!" he said pleasantly. "Telephone the station at once, and get a porter to page Jennings. He's waiting there with my bags. Tell him to come home."

"Very good, sir," said Nourse, standing up and moving toward the telephone.

Mr. Parsill, with deliberate agility, at once appropriated his own chair at the desk, and rearranged, just for the satisfaction of it, the articles that were evenly spaced upon its mahogany top.

There was a knock at the door. Nourse swerved from his advance upon the telephone, and opened it. Mathilda, the maid,

stood on the threshold. In her hand was a letter.

"There was a special delivery stamp on it, sir," she explained; "so I thought it best to bring it to you at once."

Nourse took the letter and closed the door. He went over to Mr. Parsill and placed the letter before him on the desk.

"Thank you, Nourse," said Mr. Parsill.

"Yes, sir," said the valet, and returned to the telephone.

Mr. Parsill slit the envelope and drew forth the letter. As he read it, he sat quite still and frowned. Mrs. Heathcote! What a witty and charming woman she was! Yes, she was exceptional. She wholly lacked the rather gauche commonplaces that characterized Mrs. Carstair.

From the tail of his eye he saw Nourse watching him slantingly, as the valet stood by the phone, waiting for his connection with the station. Mr. Parsill could read in Nourse's look, as clearly as if the thought were put into words:

"It will take me at least five hours to piece that one together again!"

The connection was made, and Nourse, perforce, turned his attention to the phone.

Mr. Parsill, with caution, drew a blank sheet of paper from a case and slipped the letter he had just received into his pocket. On the blank sheet he wrote:

The missing letters of the word on the blue note paper were "fron." Sleep, this night, in peace.

Then he tore the sheet into the finest of minute shreds, and watched through veiled eyes the expression of beatific happiness sunning Nourse's face as the phone clicked and the little scraps of paper dropped into the wastebasket one by one.

OFF THE COAST OF AZURE

I go to Porquerolles, not Arcady,
For Arcady's the place I've never found,
Nor shall, while yet I live on mortal ground.
When I was young, a vision came to me
Of an enduring land of ecstasy,
And I put forth, a vessel outward bound—
A ship life's waves washed with continual sound—
Right glad of strife that came unendingly.
Now I no longer seek for Arcady,
And yet I've found it not in Porquerolles,
Nor shall at any place I've yet to be;
I've found it in the touch of soul with soul,
As citizen of the heart's tranquillity!

Harry Kemp

Calliope Calls Cal Cutter

THE ROMANCE OF THE BOSS HOSTLER OF THE SILVER PLATE SHOWS AND THE GIRL WHO PLAYED "SCENES THAT ARE BRIGHTEST" IN THE STREET PARADES

By Earl Chapin May

I'VE seen about all there is to see around the white tops, but I'm still taking off my hat to Cal Cutter as the best boss hostler the circus business ever produced. Cal had a genius for handling horseflesh. He could take a raw dapple gray right off a farm, put it into a six-horse baggage team, and have it pulling its share of a twelve-ton load within the week—and fattening on it.

Two seasons after he joined out as pony punk with the James O'Brien Silver Plate Shows, season of 1903, the old man—Jim O'Brien—made him a four-horse driver. Two seasons later Cal was driving a forty-horse team in the O'Brien street parade, and was in charge of all the stock. Though he gave up forty-horse driving after the stunt lost its novelty, Cal was still boss hostler on the show when he and the old man cross-wired over Minnie De Frey, season of 1923.

You or any other townner would have had a hard time noticing Cal around the show at that period of his career. A small, smooth-faced, diffident chap with short, graying hair and keen gray eyes, he would be in the saddle as soon as the train got into town, beating the stake and chain gang and the cookhouse wagon to the lot before sunrise. Then, for an hour or so, he would be just a rusty figure sitting on his horse, in fair weather and foul, spotting the wagons with an occasional wave of his hand, but seldom saying a word.

A little later, if you looked sharp, you might see him riding alongside the circus parade, keeping the drivers out of trouble. In the afternoon he would hide away in a wagon, or in some corner of the stable tent, catching an hour's cat nap. At five o'clock he was on the job again, getting the show

off the lot and into the train again. Sometimes it was after midnight before he finished. All this was a fairly simple routine, you see, if everything went all right; but if it didn't—

There was that sloppy night at Conningville, Pennsylvania, when a driver's helper on an eight-horse team was slow in setting the hand brakes, and the big top canvas wagon got away and smashed at the bottom of the hill, crippling two horses and pushing a corner drug store's sundries counter back into the prescription case. Cal shot the crippled horses with his own gun, jacked the wagon up and put a new forward truck under it, got Kelly, the fixer on the show, to square the drug store man, and delivered the canvas wagon at the loading runs in time to take its regular place in the circus train.

I once saw Cal, in the cold gray dawn after an all-night run—alone on his horse, without even a whip in his hand—stand off a gun toting Texas mob until the police came to pinch Cincinnati Red for mixing up with some townner toughs. After that he drove Red's team to the lot, and then sprang Red out of jail—all of which was merely in a day's work.

Then there was that cloud-burst at Council Bluffs, with the lot two feet under water, a hundred-mile railroad haul to the next stand, and nothing heaved out of the mud until one o'clock in the morning. Cal, wet from head to heel, got all the stuff off the lot and to the train by three, with the help of the elephant herd and some local trucks.

When we had that blow down at Marysville, Missouri, and every light on the lot went out and the place was knee-deep in water, Cal was the first man under the

torn and twisted big top, helping the town-ers to the air and to first aid. When our train jumped the track near Douglas, Wyoming, it was Cal who was first into the overturned stock cars, straightening out the squealing, kicking horses.

His ability to deliver the goods was what made him ace high with the old man—that and his quiet way of keeping his men on the job. Many a time I've heard the old man say:

"I couldn't move this show without Cal."

And that held good until Minnie De Frey joined out.

II

MINNIE walked on the lot at Eugene, Oregon, one bright June day—a trim-built brunette of about twenty-five, in a nifty tailored suit and a small blue hat, asking for the boss of the show. She had stranded, she told the old man, with a theatrical company down at Ashland, and had vamped the railroad conductor into carrying her to Eugene.

"What can you do?" Jim O'Brien asked, liking her looks, of which she had plenty.

"Sing and dance and play the piano," Minnie replied.

"About the only place I can give you," he told her, "is in the opening 'spec' and the big singing number in the middle of the program; but there's mighty little mazzuma in that. Pity you can't handle cats!"

"I got along with a musical comedy chorus for fifteen weeks," Minnie piped up.

That made a hit with the old man.

"I mean cat animals—lions," he explained, smiling.

"Give me a chance," she demanded.

"I must have something to do!"

And so Torado, the show's boss animal man, was told to get her acquainted with his eight-lion act, a feature of the big show performance. A week later, at Bellingham, Washington, Flicker Jones, our regular calliope player, jumped the show, and Minnie went into the steam piano playing game as another line. Then Cal fell for her, and the trouble began.

In a way I don't blame Cal. He wasn't the only trouser who wanted to join out with Minnie De Frey. She was the quality kid, that girl, with plenty of the right kind of nerve; and how she could do a symphony on the old calliope! She made that squawking, leaking, normally discord-

ant nuisance jump through the hoop for her.

Why, before she came on the show, I'd go around two city blocks to dodge that hideous contraption when I heard it coming down the street at the tail end of the grand free pageant of glittering wonders. It carried farther than any other calliope in captivity. It was a terror; but after Minnie began taking her seat at the keyboard, in her crimson velvet dress and her high plumed hat, I'd leave any city editor I happened to be hypnotizing just to stand on the curb and drink in her melodies. She was certainly there as maid and musician.

I tried hard to get her story out of her, for press purposes, but she would always smile and answer:

"Maybe—when we get back East."

That, I remonstrated, would do me no good, for it would mean the late fall. We were playing the Pacific Coast territory, with Texas and the Southeastern cotton States to follow before we closed season at Richmond, Virginia, and went into winter quarters along in November; but Minnie wouldn't talk about herself.

She hadn't been on the show ten days before I noticed that Cal Cutter found a lot of business around the rear end of the parade, where the calliope was. He was supposed to ride up and down, keeping a general watch over wagons, horses, and drivers, and he hadn't much excuse to hang around the elephant herd, which shuffled along just ahead of the steam piano.

You see, the old circus parade warning, "Look out fer yer hosses—the elephants are comin'!" is out of date. About all a circus parade passes now is motor cars; but there Cal stuck most of the time the parade was out, pretending that one of the leaders on the six-horse calliope team was over the traces, or some foolishness like that. Every time Minnie played a tune, Cal just rolled his eyes, plumb locoed; but the tune that most enraptured him was "Scenes That Are Brightest," from "Maritana."

It wasn't like Cal to let a girl interfere with business, after trouping single-handed and single-hearted for twenty seasons; and at the time I couldn't see anything in common between a kid with Minnie's class and even the best boss hostler in the business. I didn't say anything to Cal, however. Those quiet fellows are mighty good ones to leave alone. Ask any trouser!

It wasn't long before Minnie sold the old man on adding an air calliope to the big show band. She went on the band stand with it, starting at Phoenix, Arizona; and about the first thing I noticed, after that, was Cal Cutter, in his rusty clothes, whip in hand, clinging close to the band stand and gazing soulfully up at Minnie during the matinée.

Minnie, dog-gone her, always played "Scenes That Are Brightest" for her solo number during the ménage horse act. When she came down from the stand to sing in the opening "spec" or the mid-program chorus, or to hold the arena door during the Torado cat act, Cal just stood there in a daze. Honest, it was pathetic!

Cal Cutter was a fiend on keeping fit. As he got only four or five hours' sleep at night, his daily cat naps were mighty important. I remember waking him up one afternoon so that a local reporter could interview him—and I never did it again; but there he was now, neglecting his beauty sleep to stick around a performance that used to bore him to death, when he had to be up and around during the night show to get the loaded wagons off the lot.

Then I noticed that Cal was always close to the band stand at night, when he should have been outside, attending to his job. That certainly did look serious. At the first opportunity I compared notes with my pal, Johnny Bredder, the equestrian director, as Johnny was running the afternoon show.

"Cal's not only gone mad over music," Johnny replied, "but he's watchin' that cat act twice a day. Never misses it. He's Minnie's faithful Fido, and I don't think she cares a whoop about him. Can you beat it?"

"Ever kid Cal about it?" I inquired.

Johnny looked at me reproachfully, then glanced over his shoulder at Cal.

"Do I look like a simp?" he demanded.

"Did you ever hear of any one around the show kiddin' Cal Cutter and stayin' out of the hospital?"

"I should say not!" I assured him.

Johnny jarred me then.

"The old man's got his eye on Minnie," he said.

I whistled. Jim O'Brien was one of those self-made chaps you'll find on certain circus lots. He had climbed up from tout-ing on a Western race track until he got a share in a show, and finally blossomed into

sole ownership of the Silver Plate outfit. A smooth, two-fisted chap was the old man, with the manners of a minister, except when in temper—and then look out! I saw him pull his gat and hit a townier over the head with it, one day, right in the presence of Scranton's best policemen, and get away with it; and the townier hadn't been really offensive—just annoying. The old man understood the language of battle better than any other spoken tongue.

"Well," I said to Johnny, "if those two birds happen to hook into each other over a woman, I wouldn't give much for either one's chances!"

"Fifty-fifty," muttered Johnny, with his equestrian director's whistle between his teeth; and then he blew it for the next number.

I made up my mind to get some news out of Minnie.

"How's everything?" I began, as she came out of the ring after the singing number, while the blue-seat towniers indulged in the enthusiastic glad hand. "How do you like troupin'?" I continued.

"Splendid!" she replied, with one of those white-toothed smiles that only made her lips look redder.

"Every one treating you all right on the show?" I went on.

"Assuredly," she replied.

"The old man, Cal Cutter, and every one?" I countered, grinning.

She stopped right there in the hippodrome track, in front of me and Johnny and the band stand. She stopped and looked me over, from my saffron-banded straw hat down the length of my best pepper and salt suit to my new tan shoes. Then she gave Johnny's top hat and riding togs a careful once-over, fastened her black eyes on mine again, and said, oh, so gently:

"This circus is just as conversational as a college dormitory, isn't it?"

Only that, and nothing more. Johnny and I gave each other the high sign and formally shook hands. After which we raised our hats and bowed to a spot between Minnie's retiring but determined shoulders, which were covered at the moment by a brilliant cloth of gold cape.

"Class!" exclaimed Johnny. "All class!"

Minnie stopped to speak with Cal. I turned my attention to other matters—among them two lady newspaper writers who craved answers to foolish questions.

At El Paso, Texas, the old man had the cookhouse steward move Minnie up to his own table. To get the significance of this, you must understand that there's plenty of caste on the circus lot, especially in the cookhouse. Single girls eat at one table, married couples at another, bandmen at another, side show folks at another, and so on. Only our big executives ate at the old man's table, which was at the head of the dining tent—the cookhouse, we call it—near the door. Minnie was the first woman to sit there.

Cal Cutter sat at the head of his hostlers' table, at the other end of the tent. I watched his face when Minnie made the move. He didn't like it, and his expression didn't cheer me.

Johnny kicked me under the table.

"Somethin' doin' on the circus lots!" he mumbled through his noonday meat.

I nodded.

"You don't make me," mumbled Johnny. "Pipe Fannie Morgan, the principal rider."

Between you and me, Fannie was about as fair to look upon as any girl who ever trouped. If I was describing her for the press, I'd say she had flaxen hair that golden in the sunlight, eyes of turquoise blue, complexion of cream and peaches, and the figure of the Venus de Milo—who, I am told, was a lady of most intriguing lines. Fannie was certainly there in looks and on a horse. She was the only rider within my ken who could do a back somersault from one principal horse to another while they were loping around the ring, one behind the other.

Fannie was wild about the old man, and she had a right to be. Jim O'Brien was as handsome an Irishman as you'd see in a circus season. Curly, fair hair, baby pink skin, straight nose, square jaw, and a mouth like a ruler edge. He'd been picking Fannie out of the herd since the season opened, giving her the choice spot on the program, stopping all the other acts while she was in the center ring, ordering special paper for her, and generally acting as her devoted slave. That was all right, too, for Fannie was single and had her mother with her.

Fannie had assumed that the old man was matrimonially minded toward her; but now it looked as if the stage was set against her.

"Hope nothin' breaks before we close

the season two months hence," I side-re-marked to Johnny.

He discontinued operations on a wedge of apple pie long enough to prophesy:

"There'll be a blow-off before we reach San Antone."

That town was a week away.

III

AFTER Minnie De Frey moved up to Jim O'Brien's cookhouse table, Cal Cutter clung closer to the calliope on every parade. The drivers in the front two-thirds of the pageant never got a glimpse of him until they were back on the lot. That's why the big tableau wagon, carrying a round dozen of richly costumed circus ladies, got cramped at the corner of Main and State Streets, Wohoset, Texas, one bright morning.

The driver, snoozing on parade, as drivers will unless you watch them, woke up to find his ten-horse team trying to swing itself around the turn with the front wheels bumping the high curb. The helper also woke up and yelled. The driver pulled smartly on his leaders. The team jumped into their collars. The right front wheel jammed against the curb, the pressure cut the cotter pin—and off came the hub, spilling the round dozen of richly costumed circus ladies. They got tangled up in their skirts as they came down hard—and the show was short three acts.

The old man and Cal had a run-in about that spill.

"Where in hell was you?" demanded O'Brien.

"Back at the calliope," replied Cal, who wasn't the kind to stall out of a scrape.

"What fer?"

"Leaders were over their traces," Cal said.

"Again?"

The old man raised his eyebrows. He'd heard about those calliope team leaders before.

A circus owner rarely questions any act of his department bosses. He gets the best bosses he can, and leaves them alone. If the bosses don't get away with their jobs, they lose the jobs. That's the secret of circus success; so when O'Brien growled at Cal, in the presence of witnesses, "You stay away from that calliope after this," it meant that Cal would probably go to the mat with the old man.

Things rock along pretty quietly with a

circus until the blow-off comes. Unless you're right on the inside, you never know there's any storm brewing at all. It's "mind your own business and look sharp" if you're following the little red wagons; but a blind man around the James O'Brien caravan could see that we were making heavy weather.

I'd have kept clear of the whole business, if Minnie hadn't got into a mix-up with the lions.

Like a good many trainers, Torado became careless toward the close of that circus season. Nothing deadens the faculties more than routine, and nothing is so dangerous in circusing as cocksureness. Torado had gone into the arena with his eight long-maned, long-clawed, long-toothed pets, and put on a rough but hair-raising performance twice a day for months.

Torado had one lion, Ike, whose special stunt was to refuse to come off a high pedestal until he had torn a trick chair to pieces with his teeth, while Torado held one end of the chair. It was a thrilling variation of the old "Wallace, the Untamable Lion" act. At its conclusion Torado would jump through the steel arena door just as Ike jumped for him. Minnie would slam the door in the beast's face, and Ike would paw up the earth, leap at the bars, and make a fearful row. It always went big.

A week after the run-in between the old man and Cal because of the tableau spill on parade, Torado, who had been taking a bit too much hooch, stumbled as he ran for the arena door. Minnie jumped in, with the idea of pulling Torado out, and Ike, leaping right over Torado, landed on her.

I don't think Ike really meant to hurt Minnie, although he was naturally worked up by the chair business, the whip in Torado's hand, the blank cartridges fired at him, the circus band raising Ned, and all that; but when a lion weighing six hundred pounds is traveling forty miles an hour, with mouth wide open and claws spread wide, and he hits a woman in tights, that lion is going to draw blood. Having drawn it, he wants more.

By the time they had driven Ike back, and got Minnie and Torado out of that arena, she was something I didn't want to look at, and I've been around the white tops a long time. The circus doctor did what he could for her on the lot, and then

took her to the local hospital. I went along, feeling about as bad as I ever had in my life. The old man was right with us all the way, sitting in that crowded ambulance, and pretending he didn't want to cry. Cal had been ordered to stay on the lot and watch his horses, because there was a wind coming up from the west.

Minnie was game enough. I never saw a gamer girl. The only thing she seemed to be worried about was whether she would be permanently scarred. She wouldn't take any opiates.

"No dope for me!" she kept repeating, every time the doctor offered to shoot a little morphine into her. "I've seen too much of that in my life!"

The old man and I stayed at the hospital while the doctors made their preliminary examinations. Then the word came that Minnie wanted to see me.

I hustled in. Her face was as white as the pillow it lay on, except for the rouge spots that no one had taken time to wash off. She was very weak, and I bent low to hear her whisper:

"Lester, you've been very nice to me around the show." That rather hurt, knowing I'd been he-gossiping about her all over the lot. I colored up a bit before she went on: "If anything happens to me here, I want you to notify—"

She gave me a name and an address. I waited a moment. Her eyes were closed.

"Until you have to do that," she finally went on, "I ask you to keep both name and address absolutely to yourself. May I depend upon you?"

I nodded, and then said clumsily enough:

"I'll keep in touch with the hospital; but you'll be all right, Minnie. You'll be all right!" I couldn't help adding, as I stood there hat in hand: "I know you've got a big story in you, Minnie. This is a bully time to spring it—all about your aristocratic family, and all that."

She smiled just a little. That encouraged me.

"Come on, Minnie—give me the story," I pleaded. "What finishing school did you go to? What college? What higher school of learning? What conservatory of music?"

She wouldn't say a word. I backed out. No use!

And that was all there was to it, for the time being. The old man, pretty badly shaken, said he would stay right there. I

motored back to the lot, and the minute I was alone Cal eased up to me.

"Did she—send any word?" he asked.

"Not—yet," I answered.

He let it go at that, but I saw him watching me through narrowed gray eyes.

Torodo, not much damaged, went on working the big lion act. Cal kept out of the big top, and lost interest in the calliope part of the parade.

IV

A WEEK later, on the fair ground at Dallas, Cal sent word that he wanted to see me. I found him in his camp chair, under a bit of tarpaulin stretched from the side of his stable wagon, smoking his pipe and fooling with a broken bridle. He motioned me to an upturned feed pail, but I declined. I was due down town, to call on the local editors.

For a long time he smoked in silence. Then he faltered:

"How's Minnie?"

"Getting better every day," I assured him.

"Mighty fine girl, Minnie," he went on, after a long pause.

I nodded. A press agent on a circus gets used to hearing all kinds of conversation.

"Anybody can see she's—a girl that's had—advantages," he suggested. "She's been well educated, belongs to swell people—an' all that, eh?"

He looked at me questioningly. I sat cross-legged on the ground, and lighted a cigarette. Cal puffed away at his pipe for a while before he resumed:

"You know me, Lester—off a New Hampshire farm, twenty years a trouper, just a boss hostler. There isn't much class to me."

I kept my head still this time.

"I figured you'd agree with me." He smiled—sadly, I thought. There were pretty deep lines in his face—the first time I had ever noticed them. Pretty soon he started again.

"Fannie Morgan's been boostin' fer me," he said.

I emitted a long, low whistle. Sometimes a press agent doesn't see as much around the lot as he thinks he does.

"How?" I demanded.

"You know Fannie's been crazy about the old man all season?"

"Everybody on the show knows that," I admitted.

"Fannie an' I've trouped together ten years." Cal stopped to call a hostler and to send the broken bridle to his harness maker. "She begun, in her easy way, to talk me up to Minnie every time there was a chance," he went on. "The girls had their dressin' room trunks side by side, you know, an' shared the same stateroom on the train. Of course Fannie was speakin' one word fer me an' two fer herself, but that doesn't matter. The point is that she argued to Minnie that it wouldn't be so gosh-darned funny to think of bein' hitched to an old driver like me."

"You're only thirty," I suggested.

"That's right, but I'm a long jump from bein' a gentleman."

"Not necessarily," I replied with some heat, for I liked Cal.

"That's swell of you, Lester; but all the same I'm just a forty-horse driver, a boss hostler. All I could say fer myself was that I—loved—her, that I'd always kep' straight, that I'd saved enough to buy a farm on Long Island, an' was thinkin' of goin' in fer fancy bred horses."

"You said a mouthful right there, Cal!" I remarked.

It takes character to work up to be a forty-horse driver. A pony punk's just a kid roustabout. A four-horse driver is mainly a hostler and roughneck canvasman. A six-horse or eight-horse driver is some pumpkins. He doesn't mess around putting up and tearin' down the horse tents or bedding down the stock; but a forty-horse driver! There's only been two in the world! And Cal was a star boss hostler on top of that, and he had money enough to buy a farm!

"Well, anyhow," Cal continued haltingly, "I kep' that up, 'tween tunes on parade, an' whenever I could get a word with her on the lot or at the cars. I courted Minnie, in my bum way, from Oregon through California, across the desert an' into Texas. Then she got hurt. That's all."

I started on my sixth cigarette. Here was a lovely mix-up! I knew how the old man felt about Minnie, and I knew he never let go until he got the thing he went after. I'd seen the old man fight, and I believed that Cal could fight, too; but the old man was the governor, the supreme boss of the show.

"I want you to write me the best an' hottest love letters you know how," Cal be-

gan again. "I'll copy 'em an' send 'em to her, though my hands are pretty knuckly from holdin' the reins."

He looked down at his knobbed and twisted fingers. The bones, especially at the joints, were nearly twice their normal size.

"I'll copy 'em an' send 'em to her," he repeated. "You might begin one this way—'Five years after a dapple gray joins the show, he's turned almost white. My love ain't like that. It's as onchangeable as the leopard's spots.' She'll get that leopard thing; only, of course, you'll put more poetry into it."

Thus did I become social secretary to a circus boss hostler. Cal was in such deadly earnest that the humor of the thing did not impress me, although it did seem unreasonable to expect that he could win Minnie De Frey, if she was what I suspected her to be. I had privately checked up the name and address Minnie had secretly given me, and it sure looked as if she was of the first family breed.

We had trouped three weeks through Texas before Minnie and the old man rejoined the show. The first thing he did was to drop a bombshell into our ranks.

"Minnie De Frey and I are engaged," he announced.

The day after that Cal Cutter blew the show—disappeared.

V

I CAN'T say that Minnie was radiant as the *fiancée* of Jim O'Brien. Besides being pretty well bandaged up, I could see she wasn't easy in her mind. She avoided me as much as possible, just saying that she was glad she wasn't going to show any scars.

The old man was as happy as I've ever seen him, but Fannie Morgan went about the lot like a ghost. At Shreveport, Louisiana, Fannie missed her feature somersault, broke a leg, and was left behind. The old man saw she was taken care of, too.

Soon the season closed. I had a job that winter heralding a hopeful but unarrived operatic star. Late in December a letter caught up with me at Ogden, Utah. It was written in pencil, brief, and not well spelled. It informed me that Cal was at Turkey Neck, Long Island.

"I've opened a harness shop," he added.

"I jest had to do somethin' to keep me busy."

A harness shop on Long Island!

It was late that winter before my concert route took me into Winfield, Massachusetts. My heralding of the promising singer done, I called upon the president of a local bank. It was one of those "I Dreamt I Dwelt in Marble Halls" places. Inside the tinted sanctum I exhibited the name and address that Minnie De Frey had given me.

"Are you the man I seek?" I demanded.

"That is my name," he admitted; "but where did you get that?"

I told him in two words.

"I do not understand," he said.

"No more do I," I assured him.

He thought for a minute, and then registered relief.

"I have it!" he said. "It's Minnie Deffry. I knew her father well. He taught piano here. A morphine victim, poor old chap! I used to try to manage his affairs for him. His daughter? No, she was not finished at Tarrytown-on-the-Hudson, and she didn't go to Vassar, but she made a fine fight to pull her father out of the hole. After she finished the grade schools here, she worked as second maid for us, and played the piano in a movie house. Then she went away with a Chautauqua company, and I haven't heard of her since."

"Then you're not her father?" I demanded, looking at my memorandum.

I felt chagrined. His name, you see, was De Frey.

"Well, rather not—not even related to her," he snapped. "Did she ever claim I was?"

He read my card again, this time out loud:

LESTER TIMPKINS

GENERAL PRESS REPRESENTATIVE

JAMES O'BRIEN SILVER PLATE SHOWS

"I suppose," he said sarcastically, "you know all about these show people!"

"I'd hardly say that," I hastily replied, reaching for my hat.

But I wasn't through yet, although my winter job kept me out in western Canada until I rejoined the O'Brien show at Richmond, Virginia, in March.

The show made Huntington, Long Island, late in July that season. I grabbed

an early breakfast and a taxi, and beat it for Cal's place, a few miles out.

In a region of many necks—Mill Neck, Loyd's Neck, West Neck—I finally found him sitting sadly in his dingy den at Turkey Neck, alone. The Napoleon of many a hard fought circus field had become the little Corsican marooned on a leathery Elba.

He tipped some halters from a greasy wooden chair, and bade me rest. I mentally invoiced his stock of winker straps, throat latches, brow bands, bits, terrets, martingales, blinders, and miscellaneous equine apparel.

"How's business?" I inquired politely.

"Soso," he puffed from his favorite pipe. "Had one caller drop in yesterday," he added, gazing pensively at some horse liniment lithographs.

"What did he want?"

"Wanted to know the best motor road to Hempstead."

It didn't seem a time to say anything funny, so I joined Cal in watching the procession of motor cars whizzing past his door. Then I got my nerve in hand.

"Cal," I demanded, "why did you go into this sort of thing? You can't possibly make a living out of it."

He smoked awhile.

"I kind o' lost my nerve when Minnie blowed me an' hooked up with Jim O'Brien," he admitted. "Tried to get interested in hoss breedin', but didn't seem to care for it. I knowed I was done with troupin' fer all time; so I started this." There was a pause. "You're with the Silver Plate Shows agin this season?" he inquired.

"Don't you know we're showing Huntington to-day?" I replied.

He surprised me by mournfully shaking his head.

"Is—she—with it?" he faltered.

I nodded.

"Will—you—tell her fer me—"

"Tell her yourself, you oyster!" I snapped at him.

That got a little rise out of him.

"I set no foot on any circus lot agin," he announced with deep finality. "I'm done with troupin'. I don't even watch the circus routes. I don't know where the shows are showin', an' I don't give a damn!"

"There was a letter listed for you in last week's *Signboard*," I said.

Most of us troupers get letters through the *Signboard*.

Then, without looking at Cal again, I beat it back to Huntington, disgusted with his lack of spirit. I had barely finished calling on the one local newspaper before the parade came along.

Down Huntington's main street, past the city's only crossing cop, the circus pageant glittered in all its gorgeous glory. Banners fluttered, bands blared, spangles sparkled in the morning sun. Lions roared, fair ladies and noble knights gazed indifferently upon the common clay that crowded to the curbstones.

The tail end of the parade, with its shuffling bulls and long-lipped camels, was still a half mile away when I heard the old calliope. Minnie De Frey—still single—through some freak of fancy was playing "Scenes That Are Brightest." It was the first time she had played the tune that season.

As the steamy old piano rolled past me, I raised my eyebrows questioningly. The red-clad musician, seeing me, smiled and nodded her plumed head toward the circus lot.

"Minnie's got something to say to me," I thought.

I hailed a taxi, but I didn't take it—not that one.

Right in front of me a bullet-headed railroad crossing flagman dropped his gates on calliope and team just as a train came thundering down the track. I yelled to Minnie to jump, but the flagman got his gates up again, the driver lashed his team, and away they went on the run. They slammed into the elephant herd, which stampeded.

You know how timid those bulls are. Off they romped down the street, calliope, Minnie, team, elephants, and all. The more they mixed it, the more all parties concerned ran—all the animals, I mean. The crazy team swung from side to side, banging against telephone poles and shunting away from fences, while all the towners in sight bellowed. Minnie stood at the keyboard, vainly trying to talk the calliope driver into having some sense.

Then I saw Cal Cutter, sitting his horse like a centaur, come tearing down the street. He wasn't a minute in racing up to the calliope, swinging around, getting up speed alongside, and lifting Minnie over to the saddle in front of him. Still hang-

ing on to her as if he never intended letting go, he stopped the runaway team, rounded up the stampeded bulls, and lined up the rear section of the parade. He sat there just long enough to see that the familiar pageant was functioning normally. Then he pivoted his horse, dashed up a side street, and was gone.

I wiped the sweat from my pale brow. If I'd had any breath for it, I'd have indulged in three rousing cheers; but just then Jim O'Brien came hustling up, and gave me the shock of my young life.

"You find Cal," he ordered. "Go bring him back, see? Tell him his old job's waitin' fer him; and—tell—Minnie—I forgive her!"

Boy, I sure did burn up the road into Turkey Neck! The first fellow I struck in that sleeping village was the postmaster. I'd met him on my early morning visit.

"Seen anything of Cal Cutter?" I hastily demanded.

"Cal Cutter? Sure!" the ancient re-

plied. "We was settin' in his little harness shop not an hour ago, settin' an' talkin' an' smokin' easy like, when suddenly his ears pricked up. 'What's that?' he says. I couldn't hear a thing. 'What's what?' I asks. 'I hear sweet music,' he goes on, his face lightin' up like somethin' sang to him. 'Don't ye hear it?' he says to me. An' then I did—a screechin' sound, like lots o' whistles blowin' chords. 'I got to go,' he says. He pushes me out, scratches somethin' on a paper, locks the door, jumps on the hunter he always rode, an' galloped off. Haven't seen him since. You know his shop? On the Northern Road. You'll maybe find him there. Good-by!"

I hurried to the harness shop, deserted now, except for cobwebs, dust, and flies. Through a messy, speckled pane I saw a paper pinned inside, above the lock. Wiping away some gritty traffic dirt, I read, in hastily penciled scrawl, Cal's message to the wide, wide world:

Calliope's calling me. This shop's closed fer good.

THE BARD'S INSPIRATION

WHEN Homer sang the praises of
Fair Helen, called of Troy,
Whose beauty woke the heart to love
And war and hate and joy,
No doubt he thought his fancy's flight
Had set the standard true
For beauty's test; but then, poor wight,
He'd never heard of *you*!

When Shakespeare penned the sonnets which
A puzzle since have been,
And, so to speak, prepared a niche
To place his lady in,
He thought that men would measure still,
While ages rolled away,
All women by that one. Poor Will!
He lived before *your* day.

I'm sorry for such bards, of course;
They did the best they could,
Like architects who have recourse,
When marble's scarce, to wood.
Had they my model had, and hence
My inspiration, too,
They *might*—but modesty prevents—
My dear, they'd not seen *you*!

William Wallace Whitelock

Self-Defense

A COMPLETE SHORT NOVEL OF MODERN LIFE IN LONDON—
THE STORY OF A STRANGE ROBBERY AND A
MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

By Elizabeth York Miller

Author of "Obligations," "The Greatest Gamble," etc.

PRETTY Anne Cabell, all dressed for a party, came into the lamp-lighted drawing-room to show herself off to her father and mother. She was very demure, very lovely, a real Gainsborough girl in coloring and feature, with a thick, short mop of chestnut hair, blue eyes, a pure oval face, and the daintiest complexion in the world. Like so many girls of to-day, she looked younger than she was. Her age was twenty-two, but she could have passed for sixteen.

Her white tulle-skirted frock gave her the appearance of an old-fashioned ballet dancer. Her tight little bodice emphasized her young slenderness, and there was an air of gayety in the narrow ruchings of pink taffeta and the pink rose pinned to one shoulder strap.

Her father looked briefly over the top of his newspaper, gave her a searching glance, and grunted.

"Now don't stay too late, dear," her mother said. "You've been out every night this week, you know."

"Oh, but, mother darling, this is only Thursday, and it's my first really free evening except Sundays in nearly a fortnight. The others were work."

"Humph!" observed her father, as one who said: "Whose fault is that?"

"Well, I'm sure you look very nice," Mrs. Cabell put in hastily. "Yes, it's a charming little dress. Has Dick come?"

Dick was Richard Farnham, and some day, when there wasn't anything more exciting to do, Anne expected to marry him. She turned a little self-consciously before the long mirror between the drawing-room

windows, and her reply to her mother's question was slightly evasive:

"Oh, he'll turn up at Vera's in time to bring me home; but this is one of his class evenings."

Mr. Cabell threw down his newspaper with an angry gesture.

"Do you mean to say that you propose to go all the way out to Richmond by yourself? How, in Heaven's name, may I ask?"

Mrs. Cabell suspended her knitting and glanced anxiously from father to daughter. No more than her husband did she approve of everything Anne did; but how could they help themselves?

Anne was a self-supporting and most successful young woman, although she looked so ridiculously like a baby. She earned a good income as a teacher of ball-room dancing. They didn't approve of that, either. It couldn't be really good for her, and most certainly it was bad for her father's temper.

"I'm going in a taxi, of course," she said in reply to his rather foolish question.

"Humph! Well, apparently you've got more money than I have!"

"Heaps," she said with a cheerful grin, shaking her gold mesh bag at him. "May I offer you a loan?"

"Don't be impertinent to your father, darling," Mrs. Cabell admonished gently.

"Oh, daddy doesn't mind. Good-by, my precious pets!" She gave them each a kiss. "Don't sit up for me. Oh, thank you, Mary—I'm just coming."

This last was to the admiring parlor maid, who announced that Miss Anne's taxi awaited her.

She got her cloak and her gloves, gave her nose a last dab of powder before the long mirror, and, with a gay wave to her parents, ran out.

They sat in silence until they heard the front door close and the cab rattle away. Then Mrs. Cabell sighed and resumed her knitting, while her husband folded his newspaper with a final air, took a pipe from his pocket, and filled and lighted it.

He looked bewildered and a little hurt as he stared slowly around the cozy, cheerful room. It was early summer, and the windows at the back were open, leading to a balcony and a garden, now growing shadowy in the dusk of tall old trees.

"What's the matter with *home*?" he demanded suddenly.

His glance rested briefly upon the piano which Anne so seldom found time to open.

"I don't know," Mrs. Cabell admitted.

"Wonder she doesn't try it for a change! Does she ever pick up a book?"

"She has so little time for reading, dear! You must remember that Anne works hard. We must grant her that. She's very generous, too—always buying me extravagant presents; and she's so kind and thoughtful in helping out with the housekeeping."

"Humph! She'd much better save her money, if she really intends to get married; but I shouldn't wonder if she'd lose that young man of hers. I've seen signs that he's getting restive."

"My dear Tim, how can you say such a thing? Dick adores Anne—there's no doubt about that."

"Yes, I know he does. That's one reason why I'd hate to have her lose him."

"Don't make silly jokes, Tim! Anne doesn't want to get married yet, and I think she's right. She's too young."

"At her age you had a year-old baby," said Timothy Cabell.

His wife smiled a little wistfully.

"Yes, but there's time for all that. Let her enjoy herself while she's young. A girl's youth goes so quickly—at least, it did in my day. Anyhow, they must wait till Dick gets that Indian appointment."

Mr. Cabell tamped down the burning tobacco in his pipe, said "Ouch!" and something else, and then strolled over to one of the windows. He felt a vague discontent with life, based upon a masculine uneasiness concerning Anne.

At twenty-two, as a teacher of dancing, she made more money than he did at fifty

as a solicitor. Anne had outrun him. It was she, not he, who gave her mother fur coats, jade bangles, *matinée* tickets, and five-pound notes.

Yes, Anne was generous as well as successful. She was sweet-tempered, though inclined at times to brag about herself. She was good, he was sure, even if she did smoke an occasional cigarette and teach men, whose names she often did not know, to dance the fox trot.

II

THE doorbell rang, and Mrs. Cabell started apprehensively. It was nearly ten o'clock, and she did so hope that it wasn't the Herren-Browns, from around the corner, seeking a few rubbers of bridge.

A moment later a tall, worried, and somewhat worn-looking young man burst into the room without waiting to have himself announced.

"Dick!" exclaimed Mrs. Cabell.

"Anne's out, Mary told me. I thought—I understood from what she said over the telephone this afternoon—that she'd be home this evening. I cut old Philabert's lecture and came on in the hope of seeing her for an hour or so; but my luck's out, too—as usual!"

Mr. Cabell took Anne's guilt on his own shoulders—*esprit de famille*, as it were. He explained quite ponderously.

"Vera Gordon's dance—Anne knew you'd be late, but she expected to meet you there. You're not in evening regalia, so I take it there must have been a little misunderstanding."

A queer expression hovered momentarily on the young man's face.

"It's my mistake, I'm afraid. May I use the telephone?"

"By all means," he was assured.

In spite of his obvious fatigue, there was something alert and keen—also something very fine—in Anne's young man. It struck her father that, like himself, Dick Farnham was finding it a job to keep up with Anne. She might so easily beat him in the long run, and with scarcely any effort on her part!

The telephone was in a small room across the hall, known to the family as the "den," where Timothy Cabell retired when he brought work home or had accounts to make up.

Dick closed the door after he entered, and, threshing through the telephone direc-

tory, finally tracked to earth the particular Gordon he wanted. Being answered, he inquired for Anne's chum, and was told that Miss Vera, having paid a call to the dentist that afternoon, was feeling a little indisposed, and had gone to bed.

"Oh, no, sir," said the voice at the other end. "The dance isn't to-night. It's next week. Oh, no, sir—Miss Cabell isn't here."

Dick thanked the voice, and they rang off.

In the present state of his feelings this was almost enough for Dick Farnham. The Gordons were not giving a dance, and Anne had lied to her parents. Moreover, she had given Dick to understand that she would be home this evening, although it was agreed that he would not call. His rooms were in Bloomsbury, and the Cabells lived in the Boltons, South Kensington. With that Indian appointment in view, Dick was attending classes in Hindustani and other things three nights a week.

The first he had heard about Vera's supposed party was when he entered the house a few moments ago. He didn't intend to give Anne away, but later, of course, they would have it out, she and he; and this time with no nonsense on either side.

He loved Anne—loved her dearly—but recently it had come to him that a man, if he is to be called by that name, may find it necessary to sacrifice his happiness on the altar of self-respect. It would be an insult to any woman to offer her the life companionship of one who had no respect for himself; and this time Anne had gone a little too far in the game of making him feel a fool.

"Well?" questioned her father, when he returned to the drawing-room.

"It's all right," the young man replied. "I'll get along now, change, and go out to Richmond."

"Don't you do it," advised Mr. Cabell. "Take a tip from me, and consider your own comfort now and again. Have a glass of beer?"

"Thanks, I—I think I'd better be off," Dick replied. "Thanks all the same."

He was certain that if he remained much longer in the company of Anne's unsuspecting parents, he would betray her to them. His nerves were in too ragged a state to be relied upon. To-night he had made himself a party to her deception, and on that account he could not help feeling a heavy sense of responsibility.

But he did not go very far away.

There was nothing to do, now, but pace the length of the block and back again until Anne's return—slowly, thoughtfully, striving to crush down anger and resentment; trying to make reasonable excuses for her, but coming to the conclusion that there could be no excuse, reasonable or otherwise.

Dick Farnham thought of many things as he waited for Anne. Among them there came to him the notion that all human affairs were regulated by the swing of a giant pendulum controlling the hands of a giant clock. Now it went slowly up, and now slowly down, but never was it at rest; and as the pendulum swung, the hands of the giant clock moved steadily on.

Human affairs—such as the love of men and women for each other and for their children—their hates, too—and always, always the struggle to gain money.

Perhaps that last was the most important of them all; and now, as the pendulum swung up on her side, perhaps it was woman's turn to gather in the lion's share of gold, and, by virtue of paying the piper, to call the tune.

But it was not a tune to which Dick Farnham felt he could dance with any show of grace.

III

MEANWHILE the object of all this worry had sped on her way, which had not led her to Richmond.

One of Anne Cabell's many failings was a sublime belief that she could "take care of herself"—a conviction which has probably caused more people to come to grief than any other popular fallacy in the world. Anne not only felt confident of taking care of herself, but she was also sure that she could take care of other people.

Although it was true enough that at this particular period of her life Anne Cabell found little time for books, she still had plenty of time for that circular species of thinking which begins and ends with the triumph of self in the rôle of absolute selfishness. What about our old friend *Don Quixote* and his windmills? Anne, at this moment, was about to charge a subtle species of windmill; but she had no idea that it really was subtle.

"Put me down at the Underground Station, Victoria," she told the driver of the taxicab.

And put her down there he did.

Afterward she could not explain to herself why she should have approached her actual destination in such a guarded manner. Perhaps it was because she wished to leave a little loophole for a possible change of mind at the last moment. To drive straight up to St. Godolph's Mansions, get out there, and pay the fare, would have committed her.

Anne had no intention of changing her mind, however, and the three blocks she had to walk merely cooled her head and solidified her purpose.

The man she was going to call upon—yes, it was a man—would be expecting her, for she had made an appointment with him over the telephone, her favorite method of communication. Moreover, he was no stranger to her, nor even a recent acquaintance. They had partnered each other in exhibition dances twice weekly for six months past at the Seeley Club, and for more than a year they had been separate features of the smart little *thé dansant* at the Hotel Justine; but so far they had never met privately, or in a social sense. With them it had been nothing but a matter of business, and both were as hard as nails about it.

Anne Cabell entered the portals of No. 2 Block, St. Godolph's Mansions, with no premonition of possible disaster. The failure of her self-imposed mission was quite within the possibilities, but she did not choose to admit that.

St. Godolph's was just the sort of place she would have expected Bernard Stockmar to live in, presenting as it did a marble entrance hall carpeted with strips of maroon plush, a couple of palms in gilt wicker baskets, and a lift man in maroon broadcloth decorated with gilt braid and buttons.

"Smacking of the movies!" thought Anne, with a sarcastic grimace.

The lift man, as he petulantly cast aside his late sporting edition, reminded her of her father. The resemblance lay merely in the gesture, however.

"Mr. Stockmar, miss? Yes, miss—his apartment is No. 33."

Anne was borne upward to the fourth floor, where the lift man became unwontedly polite and pushed the bell of No. 33 before he descended again.

The door was opened presently by a plain-featured, middle-aged servant, who

gave Anne a very sour welcome, but nevertheless seemed inclined to admit her.

"Mr. Stockmar is at home—yes. I believe he's expecting a caller. If you will kindly give me your name—"

Anne became uncomfortably conscious that the maid or housekeeper, whichever it might be, distinctly disapproved of her. The woman looked as if she had Methodist principles, and was quite sure in her own mind that Anne hadn't.

Before she could furnish this cold-eyed person with the information that she was Miss Cabell, a door on one side of the small square hall opened, and an ornately handsome young man looked out.

"Hello, girly!" he exclaimed. "Come along in! This way, my dear. My word, but aren't we looking smart? Oh, I shan't want you any more this evening, Mrs. Bolland. You may go home now."

"Thank you, sir," said the sour one.

Anne's pretty face stiffened. She wasn't at all pleased to be addressed so familiarly by Bernard Stockmar.

Carefully arranging her dignity, she preceded him into the apartment he designated—a fair-sized room almost blotted out in a riot of divans, cushions, and vast easy-chairs, the whole theatrically illuminated by lights in Chinese lanterns, tempered to display advantageously a color scheme of lacquer red, gold, and blue.

The owner of all this luxury stood smiling as he waited for Anne to express her admiration of it. Most women found his room irresistible, as some of them found him.

Yet as Anne looked at him—with new eyes, it must be admitted—she wondered how *anybody* could fail to see through him, clear through to his mean, cowardly heart, if such a creature possessed a heart. It wasn't because he was dandified, with a drawn-in waist, or because he might be suspected of marcelling his hair, or because he had a long, narrow, white face with a thin-lipped, glittering smile, and a pair of dark eyes that could be as languishing as love and as cold as stones—it wasn't for any of these reasons that Anne Cabell thoroughly despised her dancing partner. She was too much accustomed to his personal appearance to notice it.

"Won't you sit down? I think I can guess why you wanted to see me, although I must say I was a little intrigued—a little flattered—when you rang me up."

There was a queer expression in his eyes which might be described as admiration overlaid with anxiety.

"Were you?" Anne cut in sharply. "Then, if you can guess—"

"You've decided to reconsider that offer we had. Well, you're just in time, girly. I had all but thrown over the idea. They didn't want me without you, anyhow."

The offer he had mentioned had been of an engagement to partner him for the Riviera season at a famous Monte Carlo hotel.

Anne shook her head.

"I never had the faintest idea of accepting it, and, even if I had, my people wouldn't have let me. I've come to speak to you about Vera."

Instantly the man's smile vanished. He looked Anne up and down as she stood there glaring at him, pretty as a picture in spite of her fury. His eyes narrowed.

"And what has—er—my friendship with Miss Gordon to do with you?" he asked with supercilious politeness.

"Everything. Unfortunately, she met you through me. When she asked me to recommend a dancing instructor, and I suggested you, I never dreamed—I never imagined—"

"That it would ripen into a love affair?"

"That you would blackmail a woman. You have some silly letters of hers, and you've been getting money out of her on the strength of them," Anne said, her voice shaking with anger.

Stockmar raised his eyebrows.

"Did Miss Gordon give you all this precious information?"

"She told me about it. She's half out of her mind."

"Did she tell you that we were secretly engaged, and that she threw me over for Chereworth?"

"I'm not here to discuss why she threw you over. That has nothing to do with me. Besides, you couldn't have been engaged to her, because everybody at the Justine knows that you're married already. Your wife used to come every Saturday night and sit in the foyer until you gave her some money."

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"She doesn't do it any more. We happen to be divorced—since you are so interested in my affairs."

"I don't care anything about your beastly affairs," Anne retorted. "I want those

letters. Vera says there are eight of them. Please hand them over. I've got to go out there to-night, and it's getting late."

Stockmar was moved to gentle laughter.

"Look here, Miss Anne Cabell, you take a mighty high hand, don't you? Well, I'm going to give you a chance to play the heroine. I'll give you those precious letters if you'll reconsider the Monte Carlo proposition. I want you for that—I want you badly. I've got a little financial crisis on at the moment, and something's got to be done about it. Besides, I've felt that I wanted to make love to you, and Monte Carlo isn't a bad setting for romance."

Anne shuddered with indignation. As she was opening her lips to flay him alive, he made a quick gesture.

"Wait! Take your time over it. You're too angry now even to be decently civil. Fifty pounds a week for a ten weeks' season, not mentioning all the little extras, isn't to be despised. On that salary you could afford a brace of chaperons, most adorable Anne! Take all night to think it over, if you like; but I'll be back about midnight, and if you've changed your mind by that time—"

He broke off suddenly. As his intention became clear to her, there was a double dash across the room. Anne lost the race. She brought up panting against a closed door, and, while she tore frantically at the knob, a key clicked on the outside.

She was locked in.

IV

For a moment she stood there, breathing hard, utterly confused by the speed with which this situation had developed.

Somewhere another door banged, like a mocking last word. She looked at the lacquer-cased clock on the mantel. It was twenty-five minutes past ten; so, if the beast kept to his time table, she had an hour and a half in which to cool off.

Perhaps he wouldn't let her go even then. Perhaps he would keep her locked in here all night, as he had covertly threatened. There had been in his manner a suggestion of desperation which had not escaped Anne—a queer combination of passion and avarice. She was used to his love of money, but passion, as regarded herself, was something new, and it frightened her.

She thought of her father and mother, and tears welled into her eyes. She thought

of Dick Farnham, and suddenly it seemed as if her heart would burst.

What an awful fool Vera had been! What a fool she was herself!

She tried hard to take herself in hand, and to regain that poise in which she had perhaps felt too much pride; but in her cool, gentle little way Anne Cabell, at this moment, was "seeing red."

She saw too much red, in fact; for suddenly, in its aimless roving, her glance came to rest upon a gloriously lacquered Chinese cabinet at the end of the room. Some angry words of Vera's stirred in her memory:

"He keeps them"—referring to the silly letters—"in a red Chinese cabinet. It's an antique, but he's had a modern lock fixed in it. He said they were so precious—the beast!"

Anne strolled down the length of the room and inspected the article of furniture which had caught her attention. It might be an antique, but its lock was of the Yale pattern.

Bernard Stockmar had left her alone with her temper, but he could have had no idea that she would discover such a temptation to vent it. By locking her in here, he had laid himself open to a serious legal charge; but no doubt he counted on Anne's fear of publicity to prevent her taking that sort of revenge. Well, she would get her money's worth, anyway. She would have the laugh on him.

There was a steel poker in the fireplace, and Anne selected it as a likely weapon with which to attack the Chinese cabinet. Quite deliberately she smashed the lacquered face of the thing to splinters, burst it open, and tumbled out a number of drawers before she found Vera's letters.

And Vera's weren't the only letters addressed to Bernard Stockmar in a feminine handwriting. There were any amount of little scented packets prosaically labeled and kept together by rubber bands. Anne blushed for her susceptible sex, but she didn't take it upon herself to destroy any except Vera's. She counted these, to make sure they were all there, and then set fire to them in the empty grate. They were blazing merrily when a man's voice—surprisingly close—inquired:

"I say, is anything the matter?"

Anne dropped the poker with which she had been stirring up the burning sheets, and it fell upon the rug with a soft thud.

That wasn't Stockmar's voice, and it didn't come from this room, either; yet how near it sounded!

She went to one of the windows, parted the curtains cautiously, and found herself directly face to face with a man leaning on the sill of a window opposite, across a narrow area of not more than ten feet. St. Godolph's Mansions had been planned in this space-saving fashion. The stranger lived in what was probably either No. 1 or No. 3 block.

To young Anne Cabell he appeared to be a kindly middle-aged gentleman with a quizzical, monkeylike expression of interest in his eyes. As he leaned with both elbows on the sill, he sucked negligently at a short-stemmed, poisonous-looking pipe.

"Anything the matter?" he repeated.

"I've been locked in this room!" she replied angrily.

The middle-aged gentleman—whose actual age was somewhere in the neighborhood of forty—had reason to register surprise at this statement, and did so.

"Can't you make anybody else hear? I heard you plainly enough. It sounded as if you were smashing up the furniture."

"There's nobody in the flat," Anne told him.

"Wait a minute! I'll ring down to your porter. You're Block 2, aren't you? What's your flat number?"

The friendly man from over the way couldn't see Anne's face very well, for the light was all behind her.

"No—you mustn't do that!" she cried. "It's dreadful. I've been locked in on purpose!"

The tone of her voice, more than her words, told him something. There was silence for the better part of a moment, then he said quietly:

"Have you head and nerve enough to be carried over here on a plank?"

"I don't think I know what you mean," Anne faltered; "but I think I have nerve enough for almost anything after—after this!"

"Wait a minute!"

He was gone from the window, and she heard him moving about, pulling and hauling at something. There was a bump, and presently the end of a twelve-inch plank came through the window and began to approach Anne's side of the area.

Then appeared the middle-aged gentleman's head.

"I've got the decorators in," he explained, "and they've been doing the ceilings to-day. This will be pretty firm, and there's not much more than three yards between us. I'm goat-footed, and more at home on heights and narrow ledges than in the middle of a daisy field; so if you'll promise faithfully not to clutch me or wriggle, I think I can carry you across all right."

The idea became clear as the end of the plank went on moving toward Anne and finally came to rest on her window sill.

"Turn out your lights," the man said.

She obeyed him. Quite surprisingly, she was calm now. Almost, she thought, she might have ventured across the plank bridge by herself; but below yawned a deep, narrow cavern—too deep and narrow, and much too dark, for a novice in mountaineering to brave.

It struck her that for the better confusion of Mr. Bernard Stockmar she might draw the curtains behind her, leaving them as she had found them; and this she did, after she had crept out on the broad sill. There was no need to bother about the window, for that had been open.

Her rescuer came over the plank like a confident cat on a garden wall.

"Pickaback," he said concisely. "Put your arms around my neck, but don't throttle me. Don't move a muscle, and shut your eyes. Hold your weight light, and balance it, if you know what I mean."

Being in her professional capacity something of an athlete, Anne did know.

It required, as he had warned her, head and nerve, but in this emergency she was possessed of both; yet it seemed like a hundred years that she clung there, her arms around his neck, her knees pressed against his sides, while he bore her over the deep, dark chasm.

"Duck your head. I'm going to throw you inside. Let yourself go, and it won't hurt."

Anne knew that trick, too, and again she obeyed.

The next moment she was gathering herself up from the floor of a dismantled room, while the middle-aged gentleman hauled in the emergency drawbridge.

Poor little Anne, with her tulle skirts torn and crushed and her pink rose mysteriously vanished—although she didn't know that—had only one thought in her mind. She was grateful, but she didn't

want to explain anything. She wanted to get home.

"I don't quite know how to thank you," she said. She held out both her hands, and the middle-aged gentleman took and pressed them kindly. "I got myself into an awful fix," she went on. "It was very stupid of me, but I wonder if you'd mind—if you'd let me slip away without—without saying anything more? I want to get home. I'm so tired!"

"Would you like me to get you a taxi?"

"Oh, no, thank you! I can't possibly give you any more trouble. Just let me slip off by myself."

It was as well for Anne Cabell's youthful pride that she did not see the smile on the middle-aged gentleman's lips as he piloted her past the paint pots and ladders to the door. Perhaps she had taken his service a little too much for granted, and perhaps he knew it; but he didn't appear to resent her haste to get away. Afterward she was to remember that, and also that he had aided her to escape from the locked room without a single question as to how she happened to be there, who she was, and what right, if any, she had to escape.

She hurried down the silent stairs, thankful not to meet a soul. In the entrance hall she caught a glimpse of the porter's back. He was engaged at the telephone, and did not turn his head as she passed.

A few moments later, in the blessed solitude of a cab, Anne began to sort herself out. She was all there, so far as she knew—her gloves in her bag, her bag dangling from her arm, her short cloak wrapped about her shoulders; but the fluffy tulle skirt looked as if it had been through the war, and, although she didn't know it, Anne's pretty face also had a rather ravaged look.

A church clock chimed twelve as the taxi bore her into the quiet Boltons. How peaceful it was, with the old trees casting their shadows against bright patches of moonlight! A lump rose in her throat at the sight of home, and of the light burning dimly in the front hall to welcome her. Her father and mother would have gone to bed long ago, and in the circumstances that was a blessing.

V

ANNE had paid off the taxi, and had set foot on her home doorstep, when a form rose up out of the shadows, causing her to

start back with a cry on her lips which was instantly checked when she realized who it was.

"So you're back at last! Have a good time at Vera's?"

"Dick! Heavens, how you frightened me! Who—what—why—is anything the matter?"

"I'll come in with you for a few minutes, if I may," he said coldly. "Here—give me that key."

She dropped it from her shaking hand into his, which was also shaking, but he finally managed to fit it into the lock, and they entered the quiet, sleeping house.

Anne switched on a light in the drawing-room, thinking that there was something wrong with Dick's voice. It roused the liveliest of apprehensions in her.

"I asked you if you'd enjoyed yourself at Vera's," he said. There was nothing in him now of the meek, suppliant lover who heretofore had allowed Anne to twist him around her little finger. "But I'm not going to give you a chance to lie to me. You haven't been to Vera's. There was no dance there to-night. I'm afraid you've mixed your dates, Anne. The festivity is next week, according to the Gordon parlor maid."

Anne gave a soft gasp of dismay. It was exactly what she had done—mixed her dates; and she hadn't mentioned the dance to Dick because she wanted to go to St. Godolph's Mansions before going out to Richmond, and she was afraid he would insist upon cutting his classes and calling to escort her. She had a bitter sense of being taken at a disadvantage. Her personal appearance was all against her, and circumstantial evidence was against her. Even the facts, she had to admit, were against her—the very truth itself, since she dared not tell it.

It happened that Dick, with the peculiar perversity of lovers, had long ago pitched upon Bernard Stockmar as an odious object of jealousy. To say that she had gone to Stockmar's flat all by herself, on a matter of business, and to try to convince a jealous man that she really had mixed her Thursday dates, and had meant to go out to Richmond afterward—well, Anne had too much sense to try it.

First of all, it would have elicited a fiery "Why?" And to tell Dick why, would have been to give Vera dead away. Dick didn't approve of Vera, either.

Anne's heart sank. There was no cruelty in her nature, even though in the past, where Dick was concerned, she had been heedless and high-handed. It hurt her to cause him suffering; and she realized now how truly she loved him, and how often she must have made him suffer. He was working hard to win the means to marry her, bending every ounce of strength he possessed to that purpose, while she, to say the least, hadn't helped in quite the right way.

To see things in their true perspective when it threatens to be too late to profit by it isn't an uncommon experience.

Why hadn't she stuck to the children's dancing classes with which her second-rate little "career" had begun? They had paid pretty well, and nobody had objected to her occupying herself and earning money in so harmless a fashion; but she had moved on, perhaps carried irresistibly by the swing of the giant pendulum that Dick's fancy had visualized. Anne had moved on, and everything in the world was swinging on to its appointed fate. Perhaps the world itself had a knock-out blow in store for it. The great thing was to cross one's fingers, say one's prayers, and be cocksure about nothing. This was Anne Cabell's first lesson in humility.

There they stood, Dick and she, facing each other, facing their future—or, as it might be, their widely separated futures.

"Dick, will you trust me? Will you believe me when I tell you that honestly I thought Vera's party was this Thursday?"

"I'll believe that with pleasure if you'll go a little farther and tell me where you have been, since you were not at Vera's."

"I asked you to trust me."

"Aren't you asking a little too much? If you can't give an account of yourself, or if you won't, what do you expect me to think?"

This new and very cold sense of logic on Dick's part was disconcerting. Anne remembered how many things he had passed over, how often she had cajoled him. She could hardly conceive it as possible that she would be unable to manage him now.

If only she could think of a good, whopping lie! But even if she thought of one that met the case, the odds were that she would lack heart to utter it. Anne could employ all sorts of devices to get her own way, but when it came to out-and-out lying she wasn't much good. Not only conscience, but pride, stood in her way. Still,

she had told one little white lie that evening in conveying to her parents the impression that she expected Dick to show up later at Vera's.

"I don't care what you think!" she cried wildly. "Think what you please! Don't ask me to do your thinking for you! I've got plenty of my own to occupy me. I'm simply worn out, and I want to go to bed."

Her lover gave her a very comprehensive look, beginning with her face, which had been drained of most of its beauty, and traveling down to the crumpled—bedraggled, one might almost say—tulle skirts. A little smear of soot stained her forehead, which she had mopped after handling the poker. There was a tear in the frail fabric of her attire, resulting in a tattered wisp that hung down to her silk-clad ankles.

"You have nothing to say to me, then?" he demanded conclusively.

"Oh, Heavens, what *can* I say? You believe you've caught me in something horrid, but you don't know what. I'm not going to tell you—at least, not until I've seen Vera."

His expression gave her no encouragement. She faltered, drew back a pace, and rubbed the knuckles of her hands in her eyes. What she wanted most of all was to have Dick take her in his arms and say that he trusted her just as much as he loved her—that nothing, nothing could ever destroy his perfect faith in her.

If he had said that, Anne, in her melted mood, would have told him the whole melodramatic story of her evening's adventures. She would have told it without sparing Vera; for Dick would have been to her a second self, and their mutual faith would have been complete and perfect.

What he actually did say was:

"I mustn't keep you up any longer."

Anne trailed him to the front door. They had had quarrels before, and no doubt tomorrow would make this one all right, as had always happened with the others. Perhaps at the last moment, on the verge of parting, Dick would turn back and clutch her into his arms. That, too, had happened before, and she hoped that it would happen now; but he went out, and didn't even cast a backward glance over his shoulder.

Anne wanted to shout after him down the moon-ridden street, but the Boltons laid its quiet hold on her, and she submitted to the suggestion that there could be no

hysterical scene here at this hour of the night.

VI

ANNE put out the lights and went up to her bedroom, stepping softly to avoid disturbing her parents.

There was something comforting in the aspect of her dainty room, with its sprigged muslin covers and hangings and its pale primrose enameled furniture. It was like spring, like Anne herself; but oh, horrors! She stood transfixed before the dressing mirror. This Anne was no sweet vision of spring. No wonder she hadn't been able to cajole an angry lover!

Thoroughly disgusted, she turned away from the reflection of herself, stripped off the ruined dress, and threw it contemptuously into a corner of her wardrobe. Then she scrubbed her face and hands, and sprayed herself with perfume. It seemed to her that she had come into contact with something like pitch.

Stockmar—ugh!

If it hadn't been for the queer oldish gentleman, where would she be now, and how would she be faring? When Stockmar said that sometimes he had felt a desire to make love to her, there had been a look in his eyes which she wouldn't soon forget.

Well, it was all over, thank goodness! She would have a nervous breakdown, and would terminate her season at the Seeley Club. From the way she felt to-night, it wouldn't be at all difficult to have a nervous breakdown.

She said her prayers, crept into bed, and finally fell asleep, assuring herself that tomorrow she would have a very straight talk with Vera, and that Vera must be made to explain her own share of this affair to Dick.

As Anne rehearsed it:

"I did it for you, Vera, and I've got myself into a terrible fix. You must help me to make Dick understand why I went to Stockmar's flat. My life's happiness is at stake!"

And so on, until her tired eyelids drooped and she slumbered.

The day broke with lashings of rain, and Anne had a slight headache.

Some tea and toast were brought to her, and she delayed her rising until her father should be out of the way. Anne could handle her mother, and she had half a mind to make a clean breast of it to Mrs. Cabell;

only—no, she must see Vera first. It would be difficult, too, when poor unsuspecting mother began to ask questions about the dance.

Mrs. Cabell's questions, however, took quite another form.

When Anne came down, looking rather like a "white rose of weary leaf," her mother was busy at her own particular writing desk, by a window in the drawing-room. She suspended her pen and turned to Anne with a troubled expression.

"Darling, don't think I want to interfere or—or criticize, but weren't you and Dick quarreling after you came home last night? I didn't listen, of course, but I couldn't help hearing your voices. I was so afraid your father would wake up and insist upon knowing what it was about!"

There was a little pause. Then Mrs. Cabell added:

"It seems to me that it happens too often. Perhaps you're not really suited to each other. I know how fond he is of you, but you—are you sure that you care for Dick?"

Anne wanted to cry, and in consequence her eyes took on a hard, brilliant expression. She managed a smile, though it was more like a grimace.

"Yes, I care for him," she said briefly.

Mrs. Cabell took a new tack.

"Your father was a little impatient about you last night. Poor Dick—one did feel sorry for him! He'd forgotten Vera's party, and came out hoping to have a quiet evening with you here; and he had to go all the way back to dress, and then all the way to Richmond."

"Oh, yes, mother," Anne agreed drearily. "We quarreled about my—my being out so much. I'm not feeling very well. I think I'll give up Seeley's for a while, but I'll have to finish the season at the Justine. I think I know a girl who could take my place at Seeley's. I never did care for the exhibitions, anyway. They're too strenuous for me."

Mrs. Cabell's face brightened. She took this to mean—which it did in one way—that Dick had set his foot down at last, and had been heeded.

"That will please Dick, darling. Have you told him?"

"Not yet."

"You didn't part bad friends, I hope?"

"I'm afraid we did, rather."

At this point there entered Mary, to say

that Miss Anne was wanted on the telephone by Miss Vera Gordon.

Anne jumped up and flew into the den. A plague on Vera!

Vera was very gushing and expansive over the telephone, as usual. She told a long story of how she had had a tooth drawn yesterday, how the dentist gave her a cocaine injection, and how, as that didn't work, she had to take gas. Then, when she got home, she had collapsed and had had to go to bed.

Julia—the Gordon parlor maid—had reported this morning that Dick had rung up inquiring about the dance, which of course Anne knew was *next* Thursday, and he had seemed to think that Anne was there. What about it?

"Yes," Anne replied coldly, "he thought I had gone out to your place."

Vera giggled.

"Oh, Anne, you naughty girl! Why didn't you put me wise?"

"I'll tell you when I see you," Anne said.

"Can you lunch with me at the Justine?"

Vera cleared her throat. When she spoke again, there was a note of anxiety in her voice.

"Will *he* be there?"

"Stockmar?"

"Yes."

"Possibly, but he isn't engaged there regularly now, and it's not very likely."

"Oh, Anne, if *only* I could get those—well, you know! I don't like to speak too freely over the phone. You said you'd try to help me—"

Anne, hearing her mother's voice in conversation with the cook just outside the door, cut it hastily.

"I'll meet you at the Justine at half past one. Try not to be late. Good-by!"

It might be that both of them were in for a horrid time over that smashed Chinese cabinet, but it might also be that Stockmar would turn out a coward as well as a bully. It cheered Anne to recall the tradition that a bully is always a coward.

VII

SHE felt lighter of heart as she dressed for lunch, and there was quite a lifelike resemblance between her and the Gainsborough Anne of yesterday when she departed for the smart little hotel in Dusany Street, St. James's.

The Hotel Justine had a clientele which fancied itself almost as exclusive as the

Court Register, and, whatever his indignation, Bernard Stockmar would not dare to make a scene here. That was why his wife had found it so safe to sit in the foyer on Saturday nights and wait for him to give her money. He hadn't dared to risk her making a scene.

To-day, however—a day recollected afterward as a Friday and the 13th of the month—almost before Anne had set foot over the threshold, she became conscious of an unusual stir in the foyer. A lot of people were standing about, chattering in an excited fashion, and most of them had newspapers. Parodi, the suave, gentle Italian manager, was there, and had a newspaper; and so did Stubbs, the English reception clerk, who leaned across his polished mahogany counter in wordy confab with a scion of the aristocracy familiarly known as "Cheery," but set down in Debbrett as Lord Malcolm Chereworth.

Anne started when she saw Lord Malcolm. He was Vera's present *fiancé*, and the reason for all the tumult about those fatal letters. Cheery had lineage, and Vera had a great deal of money in prospect; but Cheery wasn't at all a bad sort, and Anne didn't suspect him of getting engaged to Vera for the sake of her father's fortune.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, as he saw her. "This is a bit of a do, isn't it?"

"What?" Anne asked. "The favorite scratched? I don't go in for racing, so—"

"Haven't you seen the papers? Haven't you heard?"

"No, I don't think so. What should I have heard?"

By way of reply he pointed out some headlines in his newspaper:

WESTMINSTER FLAT MYSTERY

Disappearance of Bernard Stockmar—Professional
Dancer Missing After Claiming to Have Been
Robbed of Valuable Jewels

FOUL PLAY SUSPECTED—POLICE SEEKING UNKNOWN GIRL

It seemed that Mr. Stockmar had been visited, about ten o'clock the previous night, by a well-dressed young woman, whom neither his housekeeper nor the porter had ever seen before, and that at about half past ten he had left the building alone, returning at midnight. No one remembered seeing the unknown visitor leave.

According to the porter, Mr. Stockmar, after returning at midnight, came running

down the stairs a little later, looking very wild and angry, and announced that he had been robbed of jewelry worth at least ten thousand pounds, and that he was going to report the affair at the nearest police station. He was said to have remarked that the young woman whom he had received in his flat that evening was "at the bottom of this," and that "she would pay for it."

Mr. Stockmar then went out, but he did not report his loss to the police. At three o'clock in the morning the night porter rang up the station. It was then discovered that a cabinet in Mr. Stockmar's flat had been broken open with considerable violence.

The crux of the mystery lay in the fact that up to noon of to-day Mr. Stockmar had not returned, and nothing had been heard of him.

There followed a paragraph to the effect that the missing man was known to have a large acquaintance among women, and that possibly he had fallen a victim to a decoy of a gang of international crooks, the male members of which had waylaid him in one of the narrow streets off Horseferry Road. In short, foul play in order to save the unknown girl was suspected.

No wonder the Hotel Justine buzzed!

Vera Gordon came in, pale, blond, disdainful, and dignified. She had heard about the affair already, and on the surface she was unruffled.

Cheery, of course, would lunch with her and Anne. Indeed, Parodi was already arranging a corner table in the restaurant for them.

Anne trailed along.

All this chatter! All those *hors d'œuvres* being set out! One was supposed to help eat them. One was supposed to behave rationally, too.

Somebody had robbed a flat and contributed to the disappearance of Bernard Stockmar, and the police were inquiring for a young woman who had visited him last night, with the idea—politely expressed—that she might be able to shed a little light on the mystery.

In fact, the police were asking Anne Cabell to come forward and reveal herself.

VIII

THE restaurant, usually most sedate, fairly hummed. It seemed as if every casual patron of the Justine, as well as the

habitues, had decided to drop in there for lunch that day.

Lord Malcolm Chereworth industriously assaulted the character of the missing man. He was seconded by Vera, whose eyes frantically questioned Anne Cabell as to what would happen if the police found those letters of hers.

If only dear old Cheery hadn't turned up so inopportunately!

Anne, however, was glad that he had. The letters, as she knew, were safe enough, and Vera had no need to worry about an alibi for herself as concerned the events of the previous night. It was Anne who had to do the worrying.

Now and again friends or acquaintances came over to their table and volunteered a lot of misinformation on the subject of Bernard Stockmar, his life and adventures. The girl in the case was variously identified and described. Curiously enough, there was no hint, not even by the raising of an eyebrow, that Anne might know something about it. Here her reputation stood her in good stead. She had never been seen with Stockmar, apart from their professional association.

Occasionally the unhappy girl clenched her hands together under the friendly protection of the table, but on the whole she managed to keep her nerves in order. She had to decide what to do, and to decide quickly.

There was the kind man with the quiz-zical eyes who had aided her escape from that hateful locked room. Very soon he would be telling his story to the police. Apparently he hadn't done so as yet.

Then a startling thought came to Anne. Could it have been the man across the area who had stolen Stockmar's jewels? Could it be that he was a burglar, disguised as a benevolent middle-aged gentleman, so ready to help a girl in distress, and without demanding explanations, either?

In that case, of course, he wouldn't say anything.

The *thé dansant* was very lively that afternoon, but there was practically but one topic of conversation—the disappearance of Stockmar, after claiming to have been robbed of ten thousand pounds' worth of jewelry. How, people were asking, had he become possessed of such costly jewels?

A youth named Patmore, described by himself as one of the idle poor, had engaged Anne to dance with him for the

whole session, and from him she learned a great many shocking things about Bernard Stockmar. She knew that her dancing partner had played about with women a great deal, but she had not known that there was such a string of them.

Patmore claimed to have been in his confidence to some extent.

"He got money out of them," said this young man, in the intervals of treading heavily on Anne's feet; "so perhaps he got jewelry as well. He never troubled with a woman unless he knew her to be very well off, or in a position to get money. That's probably why he never bothered about you, Miss Cabell."

"Thank you!" Anne returned coldly. "I assume that if he *had* bothered about me, I should have fallen into his net."

The clumsy young man—as clumsy with his tongue as with his feet—had the grace to blush.

"Oh, I didn't mean that! Stockmar had a respect for you, I believe. There's going to be a good old flutter in the dove-cotes over the smashed cabinet. He kept their letters in that—a regular filing case it was. I wonder if Cheery knows that Miss Gordon was rather thick with him at one time?"

Anne felt sick all over.

This crowd, this loathsome, mud slinging crowd that fancied itself so tremendously, and never did anything but smirch people's reputations—how she hated it! She could scarcely bear the touch of Patmore's moist hand when he dragged her up again in response to the *clack-a-clack-a-clack* of the remorseless orchestra. Vera's set white face—Lord Malcolm's fatuous grin over his *fiancée's* shoulder—the Toynbee girls casting innocently speculative glances at every strange young man—old Mr. Draper, the tobacco millionaire, dancing with Fleurette Gracey, the youngest and most go-ahead girl in the crowd—red-headed Irene Masters and her cinema hero "catch"—all moving around and around in a rhythmic stroll to the whine of saxophone and the rattle of drum.

"What a way to spend one's life—and money!" thought Anne Cabell, who had suddenly seen the unattractive side of her chosen mode of existence.

She thought of her father in his dusty old office, slaving over deeds and contracts and the details of other people's wills; of her mother, kind and harmonious, making

home sweet for him; of the garden with its tall old trees and the summerhouse that her father had built in his spare time, so that Anne and her mother would have a sheltered place to sit and do what he called their "needlework."

Then she thought of Dick Farnham. Was it too late to convince Dick that she really and truly cared for him? Was it too late to learn something of the accomplishments that a poorish young man might find helpful in his wife?

It had been a slogan with Anne that "you're only young once," and it struck her now that this was true in a new and terrifying sense. She was wasting her youth, and last night's affair might prove to be a lifelong disaster for her.

Around and around! Young Patmore's clumsiness was crippling her. He would never, never learn to dance, whereas there was some reason to believe that he could learn to manage his father's estate if he set his mind to it.

Around and around! How idiotic old Mr. Draper looked, getting more and more tired, until his progress had become a mere shambling crawl sustained by the strong arms of Fleurette. After all, Mr. Draper had earned his right to indulge in any expensive amusements that took his fancy. He was a widower, and Anne wouldn't have been at all surprised to hear that Fleurette Gracey meant to marry him.

Around and around! The room was less crowded now. The Toynbee girls had mysteriously disappeared, and so had a red-faced hunting man who made an adventure of the Justine whenever he was in London. Irene Masters and the bored-looking screen idol were drawling over tea in an alcove. Other couples had drifted to other alcoves.

Patmore, however, liked getting the worth of his money, and Anne, throwing a distressed glance at the clock, saw that she still had ten more minutes of him to endure before their contract was fulfilled.

Then she saw Dick standing at the side of the wide arch leading to the hotel lounge. The sight of him at this moment filled her with more alarm than she had felt when he unexpectedly confronted her on the doorstep the night before. He seldom came to the Justine, and never except by previous arrangement. She tried to signal him with a feeble smile, but she could not catch his eye. Apparently he was fascinated by the spectacle of the moribund Mr. Draper

—December in the remorseless clutch of May—being dragged along until it seemed that nothing short of death could give him a happy release.

Dick, tall, big-boned, but carrying less weight than his frame demanded—Dick, nervously tense, absorbed in the futile gyrations of Mr. Draper—her own Dick, who had always hated the Justine, who didn't think too well of Vera Gordon, and who had been jealous of Bernard Stockmar!

In view of the present circumstances it seemed to Anne that Dick had had a certain amount of sense on his side. She knew that she never could have loved him had he been an empty-headed Chereworth or a wastrel Patmore. In these remarkable days young women have sometimes been guilty of instinctive selection in regard to the fathers of their future children.

Anne couldn't see anybody in the room who faintly resembled a father for her children, save Dick Farnham. She was proud of him, proud of his cold air of defiance of herself and this dull-brained crowd, proud that he had signaled out the pathetic spectacle of Mr. Draper, and was puzzling over it as over an interesting psychological problem—which it surely was.

Half past six! The orchestra began tenderly putting up its instruments, which went into various sorts of swaddling clothes—a harsh canvas covering for the drum, flannels for the brass. Anne nodded to Dick, and gave him a word as she passed on her way to the cloakroom:

"With you in a moment."

He nodded in reply, but said nothing.

Mechanically she set herself to rights after the long struggle against young Patmore's clumsiness, changing her suffering shoes, and dusting her heated face with powder. Just as she was almost ready to go, Vera Gordon came in.

Anne had hoped to avoid a private talk with Vera, but now she was dragged to a corner and whispered at endlessly. Did she think any of those letters would come to light? Suppose the police called upon Vera—how could she explain it to her parents? They thought the money Stockmar had squeezed out of her had been lost in betting on the races.

"And didn't you say over the telephone this morning that you had something to tell me?" she wound up.

"Only that Dick and I had a row last night," Anne replied hurriedly. "I had

another engagement, and didn't tell him about it. I really must go now, Vera. He's waiting for me."

"From the look of his face," said Vera, "I should think there was going to be another row. Oh, Anne, dear Anne, suppose the police—"

"Oh, don't be foolish! Just sit tight, Vera. I'm willing to wager almost anything that nothing will happen to you. I must go!"

Reluctantly Vera released her.

Anne went out, her heart quaking, but she threw smiles and words left and right. She neatly evaded Patmore, who was hovering around with the intention of "booking" her again for to-morrow afternoon, she agreed with the gentle Parodi that she not only looked but felt tired, and finally she gained the entrance where Dick was waiting for her.

"Shall we walk in the park for awhile?" he asked, as they turned their backs on the Justine.

Anne wanted to weep.

"If you'd been trodden on all the afternoon by a six-foot village idiot," she said bitterly, "you wouldn't choose walking for a recreation!"

Dick hailed a taxi.

"I wasn't thinking of recreation," he replied. "I wanted to talk with you—somewhere out of doors."

Apprehensively Anne scanned his profile, and from its expression she came to the conclusion that everything in the world was against her.

"Well, we can drive through the park, if you like."

She tried to speak with indifference, but her voice shook and betrayed her.

They got into the taxi, which turned up St. James's Street and joined the Piccadilly crush.

"Dick!" Anne touched his hand timidly. "I feel so lonely! Don't you love me any more?"

Oh, she did so want to make it up with him! Why couldn't he let bygones be bygones? If only he wouldn't ask her any more questions about last night, but let it slide and start with a fresh slate!

There was nothing at all promising in his manner. He was like a stranger, sitting there so stiffly—a stranger who, moreover, was very angry with Anne Cabell.

Ignoring her pathetic query, he said abruptly:

"I suppose you've read the porter's and the housekeeper's description of the girl who went to Stockmar's flat last night?"

Anne laughed mirthlessly.

"She had bobbed hair, I believe, and was dressed in white. You'd think it would be easy enough to identify her, wouldn't you?"

But instantly she realized that by succumbing to the temptation to be sarcastic she had given herself away.

What had been merely surmise on Dick Farnham's part now became certainty. A gray look, as of death itself, overspread his face. He hadn't suspected Anne of stealing ten thousand pounds' worth of jewelry—in common with a good many other people, he did not believe that there had been any jewelry to steal—but he knew now that she was the mysterious visitor whom the police were anxious to interview. She had gone alone to Stockmar's flat at ten o'clock at night, and had arrived back at her own home at midnight in a most unpresentable state.

"Dick, I'll tell you—I'll tell you!" she cried. "Only be kind to me! Try not to be angry!"

IX

DICK certainly tried not to be angry—at least, in the beginning. For a young man, he had a good deal of self-control; but, for the moment, kindness was utterly beyond his power, and it was a little too much for Anne to expect it.

She had gone to Stockmar's flat!

There was a silence after that admission—such a very cold silence on Dick's part that it blew an icy breath all over her.

"You were going to tell me," he prompted her finally.

"Oh!" exclaimed Anne, with a gasping shiver. "Dick, let's get out of this taxi. It bothers me to watch the meter. We can't afford it."

Unconsciously she stressed the word "we," as if emphasizing the fact that Dick's financial interests and her own were mutual.

"Just as you like, but I thought you didn't want to walk."

"We can sit under the trees, can't we?" Anne snapped.

"Whatever suits you best," Dick agreed wearily.

They dismissed the taxi, and frightened, unhappy Anne stumbled along a pace or

two in the wake of her lover, as he strode so fiercely. She was wondering—now that she was in for it—how she could frame her story on convincing lines.

Of course Dick wouldn't give her away to the police, however cruelly he chose to deal with her privately; but there was this hazard—that possibly the police would find her for themselves. Then, if she had told Dick about Vera and those letters, he would insist upon Vera's being dragged into it. Anne had a very decent sense of honor. In her opinion, the fact that she herself might be wrecked was no particular reason for landing Vera in the same fated boat.

It really didn't matter a pin, now, what excuse she gave Dick for having called upon Bernard Stockmar. No excuse in the whole wide world would satisfy him. More than ever was he convinced that she had lied about having mistaken the date of Vera's dance; and Anne felt that she couldn't blame him.

He would be just as angry if she told him about the letters, as he would be if she gave another reason for going to see Stockmar. Even if Dick believed her it would only justify his poor opinion of Vera, and he'd want to know what Anne meant by mixing herself up with a blackmailer in that stupid fashion, anyway.

They sat down on the grass under a flowering horse-chestnut, but not very close together. Anne took off her hat and flung it petulantly on the ground beside her. Dick, sunk in gloom and apprehension, lighted a cigarette. Glancing sidewise at him, she noticed that a muscle in his face was twitching, and she longed to lean across and stroke it to ease.

It was all so peaceful here! The rumble of London was reduced to a droning, surflike sound, and they could hear children's laughter and the yelping of excited little dogs from afar by the Serpentine. Now and then a pair of lovers—happy lovers!—strolled by in aimless bliss, seeking retirement and respecting theirs.

"Dick," Anne began impulsively, "you know Stockmar and I had the offer of that Monte Carlo engagement."

"Br-r-r! Ugh!" was Dick's comment on that opening.

"Well, you know I refused it, don't you? I never even considered it for a moment—not for one single second."

"All right! What had that to do with your going to his flat last night?"

"Only—only, he was making a fuss about it. It meant a lot of money to him. I just thought—I thought I'd see him and have it out straight that I would not accept the offer. It seemed better to see him, he was so frantic and cross over the telephone. I meant to go on to Vera's afterward; but he locked me in his sitting room, and said he'd leave me there until midnight, to think it over again."

Anne paused and drew in another little gasp. *Dick's face!* Heavens, he was smiling! Such a smile on the lips of a man who had so often declared that she was the only girl in the world for him, and that never, never—oh, it was intolerable!

"Go on! This sounds interesting," he jeered. "So you were locked in a room, smashed a piece of furniture, stole his jewels—for spite, not for gain, I suppose—and then slid down a rain pipe."

Anne's under lip quivered, but Dick was not looking at her, and, even if he had been, it is unlikely that his heart would have softened.

"Be funny!" groaned Anne.

"Funny! Ha, ha! I'm going to laugh myself to death in a minute or two!" he informed her.

"I *did* smash his horrid old cabinet—for spite, as you say; but if there was any jewelry lying about, I didn't notice it. Then a man in a flat across the area heard me, and called out to know what was the matter."

Recovering her hurt feelings a little—for now Dick was soberly attentive—Anne went on breathlessly to narrate the episode of the middle-aged gentleman and the plank.

In justice to Dick, it must be admitted that Anne's story lacked coherence. He stared at her, and a wondering doubt crept into his mind as to whether she hadn't suddenly become mentally unbalanced.

"It's quite *true!*" she cried. "Don't you understand what I'm telling you? There's only a narrow area between the buildings, and the window sills were level. He—this man—said he had the decorators in, and that was true, for the place was full of ladders and paint pots. He pushed a plank over, and then he crossed on it and carried me back to his flat; and that's how I got out. That's all I can tell you, Dick. He was perfectly sweet about it."

Still Dick said nothing.

"He didn't even ask my name," Anne

went on breathlessly. "You see, I was badly frightened, and my one idea was to get home just as quick as I could. He offered to call a taxi for me, but I begged him not to. I ran down the stairs and out into the street without seeing anybody except the porter, and he didn't see me. Then I found a taxi and went home."

Surely that quivering voice, those trembling lips, and the soft eyes brimming with tears should have moved a heart of stone; but the heart of a jealous lover can be harder even than flint.

"Why didn't you tell me this last night?" Dick demanded.

"Because I knew you'd be angry with me. Dick, you make it difficult!"

"Difficult! It's all on a par with everything else, Anne. Of course this is serious—serious in another way; but it amounts to the same thing. Over and over again you've done things behind my back which you knew I wouldn't and couldn't approve, or knew would hurt me. God knows what you haven't done!"

"Dick!"

"Please let me finish. I've never been sure of you. A man wants to feel that he can trust the woman he's going to marry. If he can't trust her, whom can he trust? A traitor in one's home is like a traitor in one's own heart."

"I'm not a traitor!"

"What do you call it, then? 'Having your own way'?"

"Why shouldn't I have my own way—occasionally?"

He made an expressive gesture.

"You knew I would have prevented your doing such a mad, undignified thing as going to this creature's flat, had it been in my power—you knew that, didn't you?"

"Yes," Anne admitted with a gulp.

"Very well! Now would you have gone there if you had known what was going to happen?"

"Don't be so stupid! Of course I wouldn't."

"Then I think you have answered your question. Having your own way has led to this. You think that you're wise and self-sufficient, and that you always know best, but you've only proved to me that your judgment is poor, your motives untrustworthy, and your opinion of yourself one of intolerable conceit."

Anne flung back her head, and the tears dried in a blaze of fury.

"You—Dick Farnham! You dare to talk to me like this?"

He laughed mirthlessly.

"I'd like to do more than talk. I'd like to give you a sound smacking!"

"Don't you try any of that caveman stuff on me!"

"It would be wasted, I admit," Dick said with cold cynicism.

Anne tore at the ring which adorned the third finger of her left hand—that rather small solitaire diamond which Dick had bought, by dint of long saving, as a seal of their troth, and of which they had both been sentimentally proud.

Anne tore it from her finger and flung it at him. It fell, twinkling pathetically, into the grass beside him.

"Take back your beastly old ring! It might come in useful for some other girl. I'll never wear it again, you may be sure!"

She stumbled to her feet, and Dick got up, too. Both were as white as death. One would have to go a long journey to find an angrier pair of lovers.

"It can stay there, for all of me," Dick said; "but at the same time I advise you to pick it up and wear it again for form's sake."

"For form's sake! Thank you, I'm not engaged to you any more, Mr. Farnham. I thought I had made that clear!"

"You did—unmistakably clear, and it's one of the most sensible things you ever did. You realize at last that we're not suited to each other. We haven't the same interests or the same hopes and ambitions. It's just as well to find out these things before it's too late. I've been suspecting it for a long time, but of course I couldn't very well jilt you."

"Oh! Oh!"

Anne's face, so pale but a moment ago, flamed scarlet. Her pride, her confident belief that by wheedling and coaxing she could always "bring Dick around," her airy and rather pretty self-assurance—where were they now? Ground into the dust!

She had expected the challenge of the ring to be met with a quick surrender on his part, with pleading and passionate assertions that he could not and would not try to live without her—to all of which she would have remained haughtily aloof until the moment came when she had reduced him to acute despair, and there was nothing left to tread upon but a crushed and

ludicrous travesty of a man. Then, and then only, would she have forgiven him.

His unexpected demonstration of will power had a paralyzing effect on pretty, spoiled Anne. She wouldn't have believed that Dick had it in him to treat her like this; although, to be sure, the way he went off last night, without kissing her, without showing the least desire to kiss her, should have warned her.

Wasn't it cowardly, too, to take advantage of her hurt feelings at such a time as this, leaving her to bear the burden of that horrid Stockmar business entirely alone? She had told him that no one at home had the slightest idea about last night; that they thought she had been at Vera Gordon's, and that Dick had gone there to fetch her home.

"You'd better pick up that miserable little ring," he said bitterly, when a tense silence had lasted for the better part of a moment. "Pick it up and put it back where—where it once belonged. You are free—free as air, Anne. I admit that our engagement is broken; but this would be a bad time to announce the unhappy fact. We must go on pretending to be engaged—even a little more engaged than before. You may have an uncomfortable time ahead of you pretty soon."

This was exactly what Anne had been thinking. So Dick wasn't a coward! Well, she was glad she hadn't demeaned herself by once, in the far, far past, loving a coward. Of course she didn't love him now. It was certainly a good thing to find out how insulting he could be, and what a perfectly horrid bully. Still, she couldn't quite see herself stooping down to pick up the ring, groveling in the grass at Richard Farnham's feet.

"It's very kind, very noble of you, I'm sure," she said haughtily. "I couldn't expect you to sacrifice yourself to such an extent for my sake, when you no longer care for me."

Dick smiled a little wryly.

"You see, I can't forget that I once loved you very much."

His voice was quite gentle now. Suddenly he stooped down, picked up the ring, and handed it to her.

"Put it on, Anne. You must see as well as I do that it's for your own good to keep up this pretense until we find out what's going to happen. Then you can jilt me again, as soon as you like. I'll go back

with you to supper. If there's any lying to be done about last night, we'll manage it between us."

Anne pressed her lips together. She was afraid she might burst into tears again, and that would have been humiliating; so she tried to be cold and indifferent about it. She wanted to tell Dick that she was grateful to him for his support, even though he didn't love her any more, and thought such cruel things about her; but the words wouldn't come.

She was glad now that she had kept faith with Vera. Anyway, she had been trustworthy in that respect, and it was a pity that Dick didn't know it. He might have had a higher opinion of her. Well, she would go on keeping faith with Vera. Hadn't she promised on her solemn word of honor to tell no living soul about those letters? And while sorely tempted, during the past twenty-four hours, to break that promise, she had steadfastly kept it intact; but oh, hang Vera! What a selfish thing she was, to lead her best friend into a trap of this sort!

The worst of it was that Anne couldn't ask Vera to release her from the promise, because she didn't want Vera to suspect where she had been last night. She knew Vera too well. It would leak out, somehow. Vera was incapable of keeping a secret, unless it involved her own welfare; and then she could be as close-mouthed as a clam.

Anne gave her former *fiancé* a charming smile that wobbled a little at the corners, and said in a drawing-room voice:

"I'm sure mother will be delighted if you will come to supper with us. I suppose you haven't an important lecture or class this evening?"

"No—no, I haven't."

He might have reminded her that she knew he hadn't, but there seemed no reason to do so.

"Then perhaps we had better be starting," he suggested.

Anne would have no engagement this evening, unless Bernard Stockmar suddenly reappeared; and even in that case, as matters were, her dancing partnership with him had automatically ceased to exist.

X

It was still daylight when they got back to the Boltons. They found Anne's mother sewing in the summerhouse, while Timothy

Cabell was pottering about among the tulips with a small hand rake and a watering can. It looked very peaceful under the old trees, with the last rays of the sun slanting across the strip of lawn, and the old tortoise-shell tabby stretching with dainty languor down the garden path. It was like a harbor after a storm.

But echoes of the storm had penetrated even here, for as soon as Anne and Dick appeared Mr. Cabell dropped his gardening tools and Mrs. Cabell her embroidery, and both wanted to know what Anne had heard about Bernard Stockmar. Surely there would have been a lot of talk at the Justine!

There had been, Anne admitted, but nobody actually knew anything more than the papers had reported. It was all wild talk—mere speculation.

Father and mother, however, were curious and excited about the gossip. They wanted to be told everything. Anne began to regret that Dick had elected to stand by her. She felt herself getting red and confused.

Yes, it was true that Stockmar had been somewhat of a lady's man.

"Humph!" grunted Timothy Cabell. "It doesn't please me to think that a daughter of mine ever associated with such a fellow!"

"Oh, Tim! How could Anne have known?" pleaded the family peacemaker. "The poor child! It was only a business association."

"I know," agreed Anne's father. "She made a lot of money. Well, money isn't everything." He bent a stern gaze upon Anne. "Do you know what happened here about half an hour ago? A newspaper reporter had the cheek to ring our doorbell and tell me he wanted you to write an article, or sign one, for a Sunday rag—an article called, 'What I Know of Bernard Stockmar, by His Dancing Partner.' How does that strike you, Anne? I'll warrant I can guess how it strikes Dick. They'll give you fifty pounds for your signature and photograph."

Anne dropped limply into one of the garden chairs. Her photograph in the newspapers! She hadn't thought of that danger. She looked piteously white and small—a very little girl, indeed—a little girl who might just have been as severely castigated as Dick Farnham thought she deserved to be.

"Tim, don't be brutal to the child!" exclaimed the peacemaker.

"I'm sorry, my dear. I've no wish to be brutal to anybody; but I've always said, and this proves it, that no good could come of Anne mixing herself up with that crowd. What sort of a wife does she think she's going to make for a man who's got to work his way up in the world? 'Pon my soul, Dick has more courage than I'd have!"

This, it would seem, was Timothy Cabell's opportunity. For months he had been bottled up like highly charged soda water, and now the cork had blown out.

His wife looked at him aghast.

"Tim, what on earth is the matter with you? What has poor Anne done?"

Timothy waved his arms and appealed to Dick.

"You hear that? A woman's argument! What has Anne done? Nothing, of course; but when mud gets flung about, anybody who's anywhere in the neighborhood stands a chance of getting hit. All that Anne's done is to be caught in that crowd, and she doesn't rightly belong there."

Anne sat quietly and strangely attentive. She wondered where she did rightly belong. Was it here, then, in this passive Kensington backwater, letting her old-fashioned father work himself to death to provide her with the pretty clothes she felt she needed? Lately she had thought of drawing on her savings and buying a little car; but of course there would have been a howl about that.

She had learned her lesson, she told herself, and her father needn't rub it in so fiercely—before Dick, too! Dick must be gloating, for all that he looked so smugly grave; and poor mother must be terribly distressed.

"Money isn't everything," Timothy Cabell repeated stubbornly. He was off on a very high horse indeed, and perhaps was enjoying himself. "If I had thought it was in my younger days, I might be a rich man myself. I could tell you some things—"

"I think you're telling us quite a lot, Tim," his wife ventured gently. "You certainly wouldn't have allowed yourself to get so upset but for that reporter."

"Me? I've been upset for weeks and weeks, with Anne gadding out every night. Look at last night, for instance!"

Anne looked, shuddered, and closed her eyes.

"Last night," her father went on, "she didn't have even the excuse of what she calls her *work*. Here was Dick, hoping for a nice quiet home evening; but he had to go back, rig himself up in a boiled shirt, and tag all the way out to Richmond after her. I *ask* you! When have we had any music in this house? And those nice games we used to play—you know, with paper and pencil. Doesn't anybody enjoy anything that makes me happy?"

"Oh, daddy, I'll reform, if you take it so much to heart as all that," Anne said wearily. "Perhaps I have been selfish."

"It's getting a little damp outside," observed Mrs. Cabell. "We'd better go in. Supper will be ready soon."

She set the example herself, and Dick, sucking hard at his pipe, followed closely after her. During the whole of that explosive scene he hadn't spoken a word.

Anne turned to wait for her father, and boldly clung to his arm, regardless of the fact that he did not receive her embrace very affectionately.

"You're an awful bear, daddy! You shouldn't have scolded me before Dick. He got in ahead of you, and I've had all I want for one day. First thing you know, he'll jilt me."

Anne gulped and smiled at the same time, trying very hard to flirt with her father.

"Serve you right if he did," Timothy growled.

"Perhaps I'd better jilt him first," said Anne, with her brave, white-lipped smile.

This time her father merely growled and said nothing.

A few moments later he was exclaiming again over the evening paper.

"It says here," he informed his family and his supposed future son-in-law, "that the police think the girl who went to see Stockmar smashed open the cabinet to get some letters—probably her own. They've found a regular record of hundreds of love letters. He's been blackmailing women. That's an agreeable sort of gentleman for any girl to be associated with 'in a business way'! He kept a file, but the index is all in code. However, the police will soon decipher that; but they're not giving up the crook theory. I'll read you."

And he read.

Anne thought she was listening. True, she caught sentences here and there, and separate words that stood out with sicken-

ing significance; but her real attention was withdrawn from the sordid narrative, and her heart seemed a dull, dead thing.

Of course, all was over between her and Dick; but it did seem hard that he should be more or less compelled to believe such a thing of her. He did believe it. There was no mistaking the gray coldness of his expression.

To Dick it must seem very clear that she had not smashed that cabinet merely in an outburst of bad temper, any more than she had smashed it in order to steal ten thousand pounds' worth of jewelry. It must seem that she had done it to get back letters—love letters—love letters that she had written to Bernard Stockmar. What else could he think?

XI

OH, that evening, that terrible evening, with poor unsuspecting mother and dad not having the least idea that anything had happened to upset their petted daughter's peace of mind except Timothy's scolding!

Yet they might have been surprised that she had let the scolding depress her to such an extent. Generally her father's rebukes, few and far between as they were, rolled gently off Anne, who could always subdue him with a sprightly combination of kisses and impudence.

To-night Timothy Cabell felt that he had gone a little too far in criticism of his daughter, and it was he, not Anne, who turned to cajolery. At supper she looked pitifully miserable, eating scarcely anything, and seeming to flinch whenever anybody spoke to her.

There was something unaccountable in Dick's behavior, too—he was so polite to Anne, so beautifully attentive in a curious way that suggested a stage lover whose heart was not in his business. It was Dick who saw the reporter, this time, when that persistent young man called again. Their interview took place in the den.

When Dick reappeared, he looked old and weary. Anne glanced at him timidly, and then quickly looked away again. Her throat had been giving her trouble all the evening, whenever she looked at Dick. There seemed to be a chronic swelling in it.

"Well?" demanded Timothy.

"Oh, I think it 'll be all right," Dick replied. "I told him that Anne knew nothing at all of Stockmar apart from their professional partnership, and consequently,

had nothing of any value to say. Of course I said she couldn't give her consent to having her photograph published; but it remains to be seen what he does about that."

Timothy nodded gloomily. How he *hated* this thing, with all of the respectable, middle-class hatred that feels it to be a deep disgrace to get into the newspapers for anything but a wedding or a christening—and not too much of that, either!

"Come now!" said Mrs. Cabell, trying to rally the flagging spirits of her family. "What about the games we used to play? I'll find some pencils—"

"Don't want to," said Timothy. "Can't seem to get my mind off that beastly affair. I suppose *you* never wrote love letters to Stockmar?"

The question was directed at Anne, who gave instant and indignant denial.

Dick's face twitched with a little uncontrollable spasm. Oh, of course he thought she was lying! Well, let him think so. It was all one now, whatever conclusions he felt like drawing. Who cared?

But unfortunately, for all her bravado, Anne knew that there was one person who did care very much, and that person was herself.

"Aren't you being a little indelicate, Tim?" suggested his wife, with an arch look at Dick. "Fancy asking Anne if she's written love letters to somebody else, with Dick here!"

"I just wanted to know," Anne's father said stubbornly. "You read what the paper says. It says for a fact that one package is missing, and perhaps two. You see, he kept an index. Some letters had been burned in the grate, but they couldn't make anything out of the ashes."

Timothy Cabell was running his eye down those hateful columns again and commenting freely.

"The girl left an artificial rose behind her," he went on. "Perhaps there'd been a struggle. Ugh! Not a nice affair at all!"

"You've said that so many times, daddy," Anne observed with the calmness of despair.

Her problem was becoming acute. What would happen when her mother discovered that her pretty new frock had been reduced to a rag? That might possibly be accounted for, however, for tulle can get torn at a dance. The first thing to-morrow morning, thought Anne, she would go out and buy

another rose—if, indeed, she had left her shoulder ornament behind as a souvenir for Stockmar.

Her father sulkily refused to play the games that he himself had first suggested; but presently he felt inclined for music. He wanted Anne to sing, and Anne didn't want to sing in the very least, particularly as she knew her father's taste in songs. Timothy Cabell liked the most stickily sentimental of old-fashioned ballads.

Anne finally found herself at the piano with Dick—oh, so politely attentive!—turning the pages for her while she warbled in a sweet but quavering soprano a plea for *Mavourneen* to "come back to Erin"—an endless song, that. She followed it up with a plaintive query to a person named *Ben Bolt*, as to whether he remembered a weak-spirited creature nominated as *Sweet Alice*, whose hair was so brown, but who was now reposing under a slab of gray granite in the churchyard.

"Ben Bolt" practically finished Anne Cabell. The lump in her throat kept getting bigger and bigger as she melodiously narrated the sufferings of *Sweet Alice* at the hands of hard-hearted *Ben*, who apparently hadn't smiled on her as often as he should have done before it was too late. That was it—people often found out things too late, and then they were sorry!

Bump! Anne's head was down on the keys, and she was sobbing bitterly. Oh, anguish, this! And Mr. Richard Farnham probably knew exactly why she was crying, and he would be enjoying her misery.

"Oh, my baby, my baby!" Mrs. Cabell rushed to the rescue. "It's all your fault, Tim! You've scolded and scolded her, and now her nerves are all upset. Darling Anne, don't cry, dear! Daddy doesn't understand. He's only a horrid, selfish man—"

This was more than Timothy could endure. He snatched up his pipe and pranced out of the room, throwing Dick a silent invitation to follow him. The hint was promptly taken, and the two worms made themselves as comfortable as their consciences permitted, in the dining room, over a couple of bottles of beer.

"That's Emmie all over!" sighed Timothy. "I feel I was right about Anne. I didn't say too much, did I?"

Dick shook his head in a noncommittal fashion. He wished that it was considered manly to give way to an outburst of emo-

tion. It wasn't easy to sit here, drinking Timothy Cabell's beer and smoking his tobacco, an accepted soon-to-be—or soon-to-have-been—member of the family, when all was really over.

Dick had to steel himself very hard against Anne. He had to believe that the bump on the keyboard and the floods of tears had been staged purposely for his benefit, to make him feel mean and cowardly and a thoroughgoing brute. Oh, Anne was wily! He knew her!

But the steeling process became less arduous when Dick thought of the love letters she had captured and burned. She had soiled herself beyond forgiveness. It just proved what he had been trying so hard not to believe—that she was untrustworthy and deceitful.

In spite of it all, Dick suffered moments of terrible temptation and wavering; but each time his self-respect grabbed him by the coat tails and hauled him back from the edge of the precipice.

Love and marriage—love and marriage! Oh, willful Anne, to have wrecked all the beautiful high hopes she had built in the heart of one who adored her!

The culprits in the dining room heard sounds which indicated that Anne was being led off to bed by her devoted mother. Then Dick said he had better go, for it was getting late.

Timothy Cabell saw no object in detaining him.

"Good night, lad. Next time, perhaps, we'll have a cheerier evening. I expect it was my fault, and probably I'd better brace myself for a curtain lecture. Emmie's as mild as a kitten, really, but she's tremendously fond of Anne. I guess we all are—eh, Dick?"

"Rather," Dick feebly replied.

XII

It was just anguish. The tortured young man strode down the Boltons wondering why a moon needed to shine. The day had begun with rain; why wasn't it raining now? It would have suited his mood so much better.

"Ben Bolt," Anne's tears, the crash on the keyboard, her father's insistent laying of a firm finger on the terrible sore spot—all these things jangled together in his mind. Worst of all, there was the crash of his hopes, of his fairy edifice of romance and dreams.

A man cannot live without hope of some kind. When all hope is torn from him, he staggers blindly to destruction.

Dick Farnham thought of the money he had saved—so little, really, yet those modest savings had cost him no small self-sacrifice. He thought of his promised Indian appointment, and laughed grimly. Well, he needn't struggle with that blessed Hindustani any more. That was one gain, if you like. He must remember to thank Anne for saving him a lot of unnecessary drudgery.

Then his mind switched off abruptly, and took a turning which led to the remarkable and scarcely credible account she had given him that afternoon of her escape from Bernard Stockmar's flat.

He came at length to the South Kensington Underground Station, and, after no more than a second's hesitation, demanded a ticket to Victoria. A sort of morbid curiosity had laid hold upon him. He wanted to have a look at St. Godolph's Mansions, and it would be interesting to find out, if he could, who lived in the flat directly opposite Stockmar's.

However erratically a person's brain moves, the new direction can generally be accounted for in these days of superior science. A psychoanalyst would have known that Dick Farnham's idea might never have occurred to him but for the persistence of the reporter who had wished to interview Anne.

Reporters, it seemed, were accepted and expected nuisances in any case of public interest. Apparently they needn't show credentials. The one who had nosed out a news value in Anne had stated merely that he represented the *Weekly Budget*. He had called himself a "special writer."

"Very well," thought Dick, "I'll be a special writer, too. I might as well pitch it high and say I'm from the *Planet*."

He tried this fiction upon the night porter of No. 2 Block, the man who had so reluctantly laid aside his sporting edition, the night before, to take Anne up to Stockmar's flat—just twenty-four hours ago, as it happened.

But even in this short time the night porter had become more than ordinarily inflated, and reporters—being responsible for his increased sense of importance—were as the very air or gas which swelled him. He liked reporters, he welcomed them. He had taken to feeding with gusto upon their

flattering attentions, and he was in no mood to question the *bona fides* of an impostor.

For the last hour or more it had been dull for Mr. Piddock, custodian of No. 2 Block. Nothing of interest had happened. Stockmar hadn't yet returned, nor had anything been heard of him.

Piddock gave a reserved but no less sincere welcome to the pretended representative of the *Planet*. He told his story as he had told it before, and with few embellishments. His imagination was too limited to decorate a tale unduly.

There really wasn't anything to add, he said; but the police didn't attach the importance they should to the fact that he could swear his living oath that the young lady who had called to see Mr. Stockmar had never come out of the flat—or, at least, she hadn't come out of the building.

Here was a grievance that the porter hoped somebody would air on his behalf. The police thought he must be mistaken, and the papers hadn't troubled to report him as being very firm, very positive, on that important point.

"I never was out of this hall the whole evening," he said vehemently, "and you might put that in the paper, sir. Piddock's my name—George Piddock. I'd have known if the young person left the building. She didn't leave—she just disappeared. Now, sir, don't you think they might have thought of this—could he have murdered her and hid the body?"

It was a pity that poor Dick's sense of humor should be so out of focus at this moment.

"I dare say the police have thought of lots of things," he muttered, frowning heavily. "What about the building next door? Who occupies the flat opposite Stockmar's?"

Mr. Piddock tilted his cap forward and scratched the back of his head.

"Let me think now. That would be Mr. Ansell's flat. No, it wouldn't. He's on the floor above. That would be No. 32—been empty for four months."

"Empty, you say?" The bogus reporter was becoming interested in his job. "Empty? Are you sure?"

Mr. Piddock smiled in a superior fashion.

"Of course I'm sure, sir. It's let now, but the lady isn't moving in until next month. It's being done up."

"Oh!" said Dick. "I wonder if I could—well, what sort of a chap is the next door

porter? What about a quid to split between you, if I could have a look at that empty flat? You see, a newspaper man gets all sorts of ideas."

Piddock became very brisk, and nodded with a manner of deep intelligence, although he hadn't the faintest notion what the man from the *Planet* was driving at.

The next door porter was one of the best, he said, and he'd just slip over and speak to him. It wouldn't be any harm to show an empty flat.

So it turned out that in a few moments Dick Farnham found himself being borne aloft in the lift of No. 3 Block by an obliging young man whom Mr. Piddock introduced as "my friend Joe." Then a key was turned, a light was switched on, and an overpowering smell of paint drifted to meet them.

"Got the decorators in," Joe explained somewhat superfluously.

He switched on more lights and led the way through empty corridors and rooms, their tread echoing heavily on the bare floors.

"Which room overlooks Mr. Stockmar's sitting room?" Dick inquired.

"This one, sir. That's his window—the curtains are always drawn—but of course he's not at home now."

"So I've gathered," Dick said dryly.

He opened the window and looked across. Yes, it might easily have happened as Anne had stated. Probably the identical plank was the one now resting on the tops of two ladders, which the decorators were using to enable them to reach the ceiling.

"You don't suppose," suggested Dick, "that the young woman, if she was a crook, was helped to leave Mr. Stockmar's flat by way of this building? You see what I mean?"

He indicated the plank.

"Lord love a duck! She'd need to be a tight-rope walker. Just you have a look down, sir. I wouldn't want to do it, and I'm used to window cleaning and all."

"Still, it's possible."

"Well, sir, I can't agree with you there. To begin with, nobody can get into this flat without a key, and I've got that. It's a patent lock. I made sure it was locked right enough after the painters left last evening."

"Is yours the only key?"

"No, sir. Miss Duveen has the other one. She's the lady who's taken the flat."

"Was she here yesterday?" Dick asked. "No, sir—she's abroad, and won't be back until next month. She travels a lot."

In spite of the porter's confident assertion that no one had been in this flat last night, Dick was fairly certain now that Anne's curious story was true. The gallant middle-aged gentleman who had rescued her was obviously a thief, and had been sitting at this window waiting for an opportunity to burgle Bernard Stockmar's flat. Anne had helped him nicely!

Dick wondered what his duty was. Then he shrugged his shoulders and dismissed the question.

It was plainly up to Stockmar to drag Anne into this, if anybody did, and he had indicated that such was his intention when he rushed out declaring that his destination was the nearest police station. Since then he had disappeared as completely as a materialized spirit when the light is turned on. He had simply evaporated, and where he had been there was nothing. The charwoman who looked after his flat said that he had been in evening dress before she left, and her statement was confirmed by Piddock, who claimed not only that Mr. Stockmar was in evening dress, when he dashed out again at midnight, but that he wore no overcoat.

Of course, a mystery is only a mystery while it remains unexplained, and the explanation of this one might be perfectly simple. For instance, Stockmar might have had a valid reason for making a hole in the river, fearing some damning revelation which the smashed cabinet might be likely to disclose. Perhaps he had good reason to guess that Anne was not the only person involved.

Dick thanked his new friends, Piddock and the amiable Joe, rewarded them according to his promise, and went on his way, with quite a lot of things to think about.

At least there were two important things which Anne had probably been too badly rattled to discover—the fact that the flat through which she had been helped to escape was an uninhabited one, and the inference that whoever her gallant rescuer might be, he had no legitimate business to justify his presence on the premises.

XIII

THE next morning's newspapers were crammed with sensation. Anne sat up in

bed, with a neglected breakfast tray, staring in horror at what the police seemed to have discovered.

There had been considerably more than ten thousand pounds' worth of jewels in that smashed cabinet. They had belonged to a well known society woman, and had been extorted from her by blackmail. This information was obtained from one of Stockmar's packets of letters. The woman had given him her rings, her brooches, her pearl necklace, and even trinkets of small value, to keep him from betraying her to her husband, and she had staged a burglary in her own house to account for the cruel loss. Worse than that, she had been guilty of accepting insurance money for the supposed theft. Now she was likely to be prosecuted by the company that she had defrauded.

That was the first of the scandals, and an open, blatant one it was.

Perhaps the wretched woman hadn't wished to demand the insurance, but her unsuspecting husband had done it for her. There she was, caught like a rat, helpless to behave honorably for fear of a still more discreditable disclosure, involving the loss of her husband's love and of her social standing; and now she had lost everything.

Anne shivered, and drew her bed jacket closer about her shoulders. That poor, weakly wicked Mrs. Margesson, so painted-pretty, so feverishly gay, was one of the Justine's most consistent patrons; but she hadn't been there yesterday. She had probably been at home, nursing her abject terror.

Anne had rather liked Hilda Margesson. The woman was good-natured and generous, and had been very kind to hard-working Anne Cabell; and now it was Anne who was responsible for her complete downfall—the public disgrace of being found out.

Anne remembered the pretended burglary. Mrs. Margesson had been wildly excited—almost incoherent—in telling about it. Everybody at the Justine had sympathized with her, and had pointed to the heavy insurance for her consolation; but she had said, as people now recalled, that she hated the insurance, and that the very idea of it only made her more unhappy.

Oh, poor Hilda Margesson! Oh, poor foolish women who had fallen into Bernard Stockmar's net! Above all, poor Anne Cabell, who had never fallen into his net,

but who was tarred with exactly the same brush, all because she had tried to help a friend!

Where was that friend now—the miserable coward? Resentment against Vera Gordon burned in Anne's breast like a scorching fire.

Vera was keeping quiet. She was terrified, of course, not knowing that she was safe. Oh, very safe, indeed was Vera!

Then Anne's resentment began to flicker out, and was succeeded by a chivalrous pity for Vera's mental anguish.

But there was Hilda Margesson branded for life. What must her anguish be? Think of all the chattering at the Justine this afternoon. Anne shuddered; but it had to be faced, and faced boldly.

Anne began the day with a bath that was as coolly tepid as she could induce her shivering body to endure. She needed a lot of bracing. This was an awful life. She had lost Dick, and it was pretty certain that she was going to drag herself and her suffering family into the publicity of this sordid scandal.

Would it be better to tell her mother the whole story, and get it over? Dick had rather thought not, and Anne herself had no relish for the confession. She was deeply ashamed of what had happened to her; but with the sense of shame mingled a great confusion.

For instance, there was that man who lived opposite Stockmar's flat. Why had he found nothing to say? The answer was not so obvious to Anne as it had been to Dick. She had seen the gallant middle-aged gentleman, and there was nothing about him to suggest even the politest of burglars. The impression he had given her was that of a traveler or explorer. Hadn't he said that he was more at home in high, dangerous places than in the middle of a daisy field? Or could it possibly be that he was the mysterious "cat burglar" of whom the papers had been talking so much lately?

These reflections occupied Anne's mind while she dressed. They rendered her progress so slow that the morning had almost worn away before she made her first public appearance.

"My dear, you're not going to the Justine to-day, are you?" her mother asked anxiously.

But Anne knew that her safety depended on going to the Justine. There would be

conspicuous absences, she felt sure, and she had no desire to mark herself in that way.

"I have to go," she said grimly. "Don't you understand that I'm under contract? I can't throw it over on the spur of the moment. Surely daddy must understand that. He's a lawyer."

"Yes, dear, but he's a father first," sighed Mrs. Cabell; "and after last night—"

"Unfortunately," said Anne, "I was of age when I signed that contract."

There really was no disputing about it. Still, thought her mother, Anne might have pretended to be ill. The newspapers had been so very unpleasant, and it was terrible to have one's only and most precious daughter mingling with those people. That Mrs. Margesson, for instance—she had even been here, in this respectable house!

And then, happening at that moment to glance out of the window, Mrs. Cabell saw Mrs. Margesson's motor draw up at the curb. That woefully unhappy lady emerged from the car, crossed the pavement hurriedly, and approached the front door.

Poor Mrs. Cabell was horrified.

"It's Mrs. Margesson," she informed Anne. "What on earth—well, I'll tell Mary that we're not at home."

But Anne was not so hard-hearted.

"Oh, mother, please! We can't do that. I must see her, anyhow."

XIV

It has probably been made clear by this time that Mrs. Cabell was very much under her cherished daughter's thumb. There are plenty of other mothers who can understand her submission, and who can even feel respect for it, as well as sympathy.

They were good friends, Anne and her mother, and that made up for much which otherwise might have been trying. Probably nobody else in the world appreciated Anne's good qualities—her kind heart, her generosity—better than her mother.

Mrs. Cabell even caught herself blushing because of her quick impulse to deny entrance to Mrs. Margesson. Anne was kinder. Still, Mrs. Cabell didn't feel equal to facing this unwelcome visitor. Besides, she knew quite well that Mrs. Margesson hadn't called to see her, and probably her presence would only embarrass the unfortunate woman; so she took herself into the

garden, hoping—it being a Saturday—that Tim wouldn't get back from the office too soon. He had been known to return as early as twelve o'clock.

Anne went into the hall to meet Mrs. Margesson.

Lord, but she was a lovely woman! Tall, with real henna-red hair, a milk-white skin unadroitly made up, scarlet lips, and tawny eyes—eyes which, on this occasion, were wide and startled, with faint smudges underneath. Her clothes spelled red ruin for any but the bulkiest bank account. Her husband was reputed to be one of the richest men on the Exchange; and, judging by Hilda Margesson's appearance, he needed to be.

"Oh, I'm so glad I found you at home!" she gasped, to Anne. A crooked, tortured smile sat on her lips, as if painted there. "I suppose you've seen the papers this morning?"

"Yes," Anne said gravely. "I'm sorry. It's pretty dreadful for you, isn't it? But come in."

Mrs. Margesson came in, looked around with a blank expression, and then dropped limply into a chair.

"I *envy* you!" she said passionately. "You're good and clean and fine, and you've never been tempted to make a fool of yourself!"

"Oh, haven't I?" Anne exclaimed. "And fallen to it, too, over and over again!"

"But I have been wicked—*wicked*. There's no hope for me. I don't know what to do. Of course the insurance company won't prosecute. Charles will square them. You see, the circumstances will be called 'extenuating.' A good word, that! I was being blackmailed. My God, Anne Cabell, do you know what it is to be blackmailed? It's purgatory—no, it's sheer hell. Those letters—those letters! And Charles has read them, every one!"

"Why, oh, why," thought Anne, with passionate self-reproach, "didn't I burn the whole lot?"

Mrs. Margesson, at this point, extracted a wisp of a handkerchief from her bag and blew her nose guardedly.

"Charles will never forgive me. He's going to institute proceedings, I believe; but I am really innocent of what he imagines. I was only a fool playing with fire. You see, Charles won't go out with me. He won't learn to dance. All he thinks

about is business and golf. Would you believe it, he's actually playing golf this afternoon? You'll wonder why I've descended on you like this. Charles wants me to go away. He can't stand the sight of me, he says. He'll pull me out of the muck to the best of his ability, but there he feels his duty ends. I'm to go away—abroad. What will happen is that I'll kill myself, unless somebody gives me a hand. I thought of you, Anne Cabell. I always liked you, because of something that I lack. I feel that you wouldn't despise me too much. Anne, could you—would you come away with me? There'll be plenty of money. I mean I wouldn't allow you to lose by it in that way. If you could come as my companion, say for six months or so, it would probably save my life!"

Poor Anne! All because of her interfering to save Vera Gordon, that pretty-painted, weakly wicked Hilda Margesson was in this plight. Left to herself, Anne would have given in at once to the poor woman's plea. It was the sort of thing that always roused her, to be asked to help somebody. It restored a little of her self-confidence, too. Dick had pretty well smashed that.

As she hesitated, the pretty-painted face turned scarlet under its unevenly distributed make-up.

"I'm sorry. I forgot for the moment. You're a young girl, and scandal hasn't touched you. I really must be mad. Heavens, what a creature I am! Oh, forgive me, dear Anne! Of course, your mother and father—this decent home of yours—and you're engaged to be married, aren't you? I *am* mad, or I would never have asked such a thing of you!"

But even as she said this, those wide, frightened eyes of hers, with terror gleaming from their tawny depths, implored Anne.

"I think," Mrs. Margesson added more slowly—"I do think that if Charles knew that you were sticking by me, he might change his mind about those proceedings."

Anne recalled Charles. Once she had dined in the home of the Margessons—a splendid feast, but a nervously silent one. The master of the house had said scarcely a word. He was too busy eating and drinking—particularly the latter. Mrs. Margesson had asked her to dinner as a prelude to the opera, and Charles was not going to the opera. A peculiarly lonely woman, Hilda Margesson, and it seemed now to

Anne that she had fought her loneliness fairly well, with the exception of her fatal association with Stockmar.

"Charles liked you so much," said Charles's unhappy wife. "And he's very hard to please. You're the only one of my—my women friends that he ever did like. Of course, I honestly cannot claim you as a friend; but I wish I could!"

"Will you let me think it over?" Anne asked. "I mean—about going abroad with you for a little while."

"Oh, yes! But of course I shouldn't ask it." The anxious voice trailed off weakly, and then rose on a new note. "I suppose you're going to the Justine. Will you let me drop you there? And if you *could* put in a kind word for me—"

Anne kissed her.

"I'll put in a word—several words," she said vehemently. "Bernard Stockmar—if only I had him here for five minutes!"

Mrs. Margesson stared thoughtfully.

"That's so queer! Where is he? Where did he go? What's happened to him?"

Anne shook her head. Then she glanced at the clock. "I'll just say good-by to mother—and then I'll be glad if you will give me a lift to the Justine. It won't be taking you much out of your way."

"Not a bit," Mrs. Margesson assured her.

XV

THE Justine was in much the same uproar as yesterday.

"These people," thought Anne, "are all drunk. They're drunk with other people's misery—gorged and flaming on heart's blood!"

That she was, even mentally, using strong language for a young woman still lacking some months of twenty-three, did not occur to her. To a certain extent she shared the general intoxication. Her own secret misery was so closely involved in it.

Vera Gordon was there, hovering by the door, waiting for her.

Vera saw her get out of Mrs. Margesson's motor, and recognized both the car and its disgraced owner, who waved a hand and a fluttering smile at Anne as they parted.

Vera—cowardly Vera—could no more resist the Justine that afternoon than could Anne. She pounced greedily upon her friend.

"Anne, you must be out of your mind!

Hilda Margesson! You can't afford to be seen with her."

"Why not?" Anne asked coldly.

"Because—"

"Because she's been caught? Well, she's unlucky—that's all. It might happen to me. It might even happen to you."

Vera turned deathly pale.

"It hasn't happened to me—yet," she said in a husky whisper. "Oh, Anne, what agony I've been in!"

"I can imagine it."

Anne's voice was dry and hard. Too much had been sacrificed to save Vera. She had only to think of Dick, and she turned cold with the pain of it. Dick—to save Vera Gordon! And now Vera had the impudence to look down on another woman who was no different from herself, except that she had been found out.

Vera had got money on false pretenses to save herself from Stockmar's threats. That she had got it from her parents, and not from an insurance company, argued a difference in opportunity—that was all. Very likely Hilda Margesson hadn't taken the insurance company into her calculations when she staged the theft of her jewels. That had come later, as an unpleasant surprise.

Vera followed Anne into the dressing room, and asked questions about Mrs. Margesson—morbid, gloating questions that drove Anne into a rage.

What was Margesson going to do about it? And the police—they would place her under arrest, wouldn't they? The woman certainly had all her cheek with her to drive up to the Justine! Where had Anne run across her?

Anne shrugged her shoulders and became sulky, giving provoking, noncommittal answers which stirred Vera's curiosity to white heat.

Oh, but Vera was being so smug about it all, twirling her costly engagement ring, and congratulating herself that as nothing had turned up so far in connection with *her* letters, she could count herself reasonably safe! Anyhow, her letters were less likely to involve her in trouble if the police had them, than if they were still in the possession of Bernard Stockmar. She thought she could now set the date for her wedding with an easy mind.

Easy mind!

Anne drew in a long breath that had a little sob in it. She, too, was wearing an

engagement ring—a poor little thing in comparison with Vera's—but it was only loaned to her, so to speak, until the clouds rolled by.

Suddenly something stirred in Vera's sluggish mind. A faint suspicion dawned upon her of she knew not what, except that it was so very plain that Anne was not Anne, that Anne had changed out of all recognition from her former self.

Tall, blond Vera took her small friend by the shoulders and looked searchingly into Anne's weary, worried eyes.

"What is it?" Anne asked, writhing a little.

"That's what I'm wondering," Vera said slowly. "What is it, Anne? Something's wrong with you."

Anne's lips tightened, yet quivered, too.

"Anne, where did you go on Thursday night?"

"That," Anne replied with the utmost dignity, "is my affair."

"I believe—oh, I do believe that you're the mystery girl! 'Fess up, Anne!"

Vera was growing tremendously excited. Her eyes glowed dangerously, and there is nothing quite so blazing as cold blue eyes when something happens to animate them.

"Why, it's as plain as plain! You pretended you were coming out to my place. You did go somewhere. Of course, you had promised to try to get back my letters, and you did get them and burn them. Oh, Anne, that explains why I haven't been asked any questions by the police! You're a brick—that's what you are; but why didn't you tell me? Why did you let me worry so? But"—Vera's brow wrinkled in unwonted thought—"I don't really understand. You couldn't have stolen the Margesson woman's jewels!"

"Don't talk such rot!" stormed Anne.

Vera, however, was not to be deterred from her theory.

"Perhaps you took them to give them back to her," she hazarded.

"Go on! You're doing splendidly," Anne said with heavy irony. "You'll be able to write a book about it presently."

"Oh, you are tiresome!" sighed Vera.

Very likely Anne was tiresome, but she was also terribly depressed. It was dreadful that Vera should have stumbled on the truth like this, and now Anne saw how it had happened. It had been suggested by her driving up to the Justine in Hilda Margesson's car, which had started an associa-

tion of ideas in Vera's none too fertile brain. It might start other people thinking, too.

Dancing at the Hotel Justine began at three o'clock, and until then Anne was her own mistress. Vera took it for granted that they would lunch together, but presently, while she was engaged in conversation with a group of scandalmongers, Anne slipped back into the dressing room and put on her coat again. She was going to lunch elsewhere, and by herself.

A vague sense of panic pursued her as she walked hurriedly toward Piccadilly. Vera would make a joke of her suspicion. They would all be laughing about it, by the time Anne got back; and then somebody would recall that ancient wheeze about the multitudes of truths that are spoken in jest, and the fat would be in the fire with a vengeance!

How, indeed, could Anne Cabell hope to escape? Who would save her, since it now seemed impossible that she could save herself?

She didn't want any lunch; but was it wise not to eat? Oysters—yes, she might manage a few oysters.

Close at hand, staring at her, was the entrance to the Brasserie, where Dick and she sometimes snatched a quick meal before going to a theater, or when Anne had an evening engagement at Seeley's. Perhaps it wasn't quite the thing for a young girl to invade that masculine stronghold all by herself, but Anne felt fairly at home there, and she knew she could have her oysters, and perhaps some cheese and celery, without the waiter showing surprise at the shortness of her order.

She walked down the long corridor, where people sat on leather couches against the wall, drinking beer or *apéritifs* and playing endlessly at dominoes—also staring a great deal. Anne, with a slightly heightened color, looked neither to the right nor the left, and the starers were just so many blurred faces to her.

When she reached the main room, she sat down in the first unoccupied chair that came handy and pretended absorption in the menu. The tables were free for all, and one sat where one pleased. It was not easy to be exclusive in this place, but it was strictly against etiquette for a man to seat himself directly facing a woman not of his acquaintance, if there happened to be other vacant places.

To-day being a Saturday, and the clientele of the Brasserie consisting chiefly of business men, there were a great many vacant places, and consequently Anne looked up from her menu with a little start of annoyance when the chair opposite her was scraped back and a man turned to hang up his hat.

Then her heart leaped into her throat. It was the kind and gallant middle-aged gentleman who had rescued her from Stockmar's flat. He must have been in the corridor when she passed through, or else he had seen her in the street and had followed her.

Thump, thump, thump, went her heart. Her lips suddenly felt dry, and she moistened them, pressing her handkerchief to them while she stared gravely at the quizzical, humorously kind face of the individual who to a large extent held her fate in his hands.

"You don't mind?" he said. "This is pure luck for both of us. I've been praying that I might run into you like this. What are you going to have?"

"Oysters," Anne murmured feebly.

"Good! Bring us two dozen of the best, waiter, and a large Pilsner for me. What's your drink, Miss—er—"

"Ginger ale," Anne informed him.

Now that she had a good look at him in daylight, Anne decided that he was not so old as she had imagined. Those lines, for instance, on his strongly tanned face had come from screwing up his eyes too much against the sun.

"Well, this is luck!" he exclaimed again.

"But first you'd better tell me your name."

"Anne Cabell," confessed Anne.

"Thank you. Mine's Cumberley. There's a handle to it, in case you don't know—and you've got to know a lot about me presently. I'm Peter Cumberley."

Anne did know. She turned scarlet.

"Not—not Lord Cumberley—the Lord Cumberley who—"

"Exactly! So now you know with whom you're dealing."

Cumberley of the Foreign Office—the man of whom it was said that he had made England unsafe for many an international suspect, and who once—so the story ran—had all but lost his life at the hands of a beautiful Italian countess of doubtful antecedents, who offered to marry him when he ordered her deportation, and, being refused, stabbed him instead.

"I saw you crossing by Swan & Edgar's," he continued, "and I hoped that you had no appointment for lunch. You haven't, have you?"

Anne shook her head.

"Now listen, my child. You and I share a little of each other's secret. I take it that you haven't yet told anybody whom you visited on Thursday evening."

Anne drew in a long breath.

"The man I am to marry—or was to marry—guessed. Stockmar was my professional dancing partner. I went there—"

"It's obvious why you went there—to get some letters and destroy them."

"Yes," Anne admitted.

"And I suppose you told this man you're engaged to all about how you got away?"

She nodded.

"But he didn't quite believe me," she added.

"H-m! He'll stick by you—keep your secret?"

"Oh, yes!" She tried to speak indifferently. "We're still supposed to be engaged, until this affair is cleared up; but we quarreled, and it's really all over."

Cumberley raised his eyebrows.

"Jealous?"

"I don't know. I wasn't very straight with him."

"Well—too bad! Now here's my point—I want you to provide me with an alibi for Thursday evening, and I'll return the favor. This is a personal matter with me—nothing official about it. I had no business to be where I was that night. That wasn't my flat I let you out through. I was there for exactly the same purpose that you were—to rob that unpleasant young man of something that he possessed in a more or less illegal way. I got it, too!"

The kind face looked grim now.

"Too bad about that Mrs. Margesson," he added as an afterthought.

It seemed a little queer to Anne that a man like Lord Cumberley should put himself into her hands with such a confiding gesture. He had even gone out of his way to do it. There must be some good reason behind his action—some reason that might never be made clear.

"I don't suppose you stole the missing jewelry," Anne said, with a dreary effort to be humorous.

"No—jewelry is distinctly out of my line. My specialty is quite different—more in your line." His eyes twinkled. "But

I can give a good guess as to who did steal it. Never mind—not now. Later on, perhaps, we shall all know all about it. The point is that you and I went to see a show that evening—eh? Now what show can we have seen? What about 'Lilac Time'? Have you seen it?"

"Twice," said Anne.

"No, you're wrong—you've seen it three times, my child, and the last time was Thursday. Do you get that?"

"Ye-es. Only—"

"Now where did I meet you? I mean how did we get acquainted? What about Seeley's? You're a professional dancer, aren't you?"

"Oh, you knew all the time!"

"Yes, I knew. I've seen you at the Seeley Club dancing with Stockmar, but I can't blame you for failing to notice an ugly old chap like me. Now we've got to fix this up pretty quick, with all the details, because time is growing short. Let's see—you're due at the Hotel Justine pretty soon, aren't you?"

A nervous sense of alarm stirred in Anne's breast. What could he be leading up to?

She nodded.

"Has anybody engaged your services for this afternoon?"

Anne thought of the clumsy Patmore, and said no, not yet, but it was quite likely that she would be engaged.

"You are—by me," Lord Cumberley told her. "I feel I must have a few fox trots this afternoon. It will do me a lot of good, and really I don't dance too badly. Now as to 'Lilac Time'—I met you at the theater that night, if you remember. Look here—I can show you the very stalls we occupied, if necessary."

And he did show her two counterfoils of theater tickets.

"I'm not a married man," he added; "so on my side there was nothing surreptitious about our little outing. And you're done in the eye, anyhow, with your own young man."

Anne blinked, and then tried to harden her heart against Dick.

"What are you going to have now?" demanded the good Samaritan.

"Nothing more."

"Nothing more? Look here, my child—I'm a strenuous dancer, when once I get started. We'll have a *plat du jour*, to save time. Waiter!"

The order given, he began to talk so wisely and kindly to Anne that her uneasiness grew by leaps and bounds. She felt that there was something in the air, that there was something sinister behind all his kindness. He hadn't met her by chance, as he at first pretended. Why, he had known all along who she was, and could have found her quite easily. There was nothing accidental about this man.

He ordered coffee, and offered her a cigarette.

"If I may, I'd like to prescribe a Benedictine," he said.

He ordered that, too.

"Don't be frightened, child! It will be all right," he soothed.

But Anne was genuinely frightened now.

"You're leading up to something—horrid," she said faintly.

"Well, you might say it's horrid. Yes, you might say so. Still, there are ways and means of getting over it. Here, drink your liqueur, my child—and steady on. Quite a lot depends upon yourself—how you take it, I mean."

"But what—what?"

Lord Cumberley lit a cigarette for himself before he spoke.

"There's a warrant out for your arrest," he said quietly. "A friend of yours—a Miss Gordon—obliged some newspaper man with one of your photographs this morning, and it was identified by Stockmar's housekeeper and the hall porter."

"Vera!" Anne cried.

She had been betrayed by Vera, of all people!

VII

ANNE turned deathly white, and made a movement as if to rise, but the big, kindly man motioned her back into her seat. At that moment he looked a little stern.

"Have you forgotten all I said just now?" he asked. "So very much depends upon yourself."

"Arrested!" Anne whispered hoarsely. "Me—for what? What have I done?"

"You won't be arrested," Lord Cumberley told her. "I said there was a warrant out for you. Even if it came to the point of its actually being executed—which it won't—you'll only be bound over to come up if they want you. They may only want you for a witness, at that. All you need do is to agree with me that you and I spent the evening together at a theater. As a

matter of fact, I was at 'Lilac Time' that night with a young friend of mine, and I spoke to several people I know; but I left after the first act. Nobody's going to doubt my word. You see, like you, I have a good reputation. It's a valuable thing to possess in a tight corner."

He smiled his queer, friendly smile at her, but Anne hadn't the heart to smile back.

"What am I to do?" she asked, her pretty face a painted mask of distress.

"What you and I are going to do is this—after lunching together, we're going to the Hotel Justine, and I have engaged your skillful services to pilot me through the perils of the modern ballroom. Frankly, for this afternoon I am considerably bored with officialdom. The F. O. has its boring moments, and I am taking a holiday; so we dance, you and I. If anything happens, naturally you are surprised, but you mustn't be indignant. You are surprised and slightly *amused* at the idea of being mistaken for Stockmar's mysterious visitor. I'd advise you to manage a giggle or two."

"But a police constable coming into the Justine!" gasped Anne.

"Nothing so crude as that, my child. We do things differently in a case of this sort. A rather charming young man will speak to you—I have an idea of his identity. It will probably be my friend Freddy Veale. There is no question of a burly constable and the Black Maria, if that was in your mind. We are always polite."

Anne's fighting blood began to assert itself once more, although for a little while she had feared the complete stoppage of its circulation.

"I don't believe you'd play a trick on me," she said, looking Cumberley straight in the eyes.

"If I did, I'd be playing a desperately silly one on myself at the same time," he assured her. "Shall we go now?"

"But, Lord Cumberley, how can that false alibi possibly work if both the porter and the housekeeper woman persist in identifying me?" Anne asked.

He threw back his head and laughed.

"The porter took you up in the lift, and the woman merely let you into the flat. That's correct, isn't it?"

"Yes," Anne agreed.

"It was by artificial light, and you were in evening dress. They both saw you very briefly. My word is as good as the two of

theirs combined. I'll say most positively that they are mistaken, and they'll begin to see it that way, too. Oh, it sounds high-handed, I'll admit, but you're not going to get anybody, even yourself, into trouble over this. On the contrary, you're going to be a good little friend to somebody who'll never know anything about it, but who'll have cause to thank you and bless you to the end of her days. That'll be useful for you when you get to heaven. Now you really must brace yourself up to face the music in a double sense. I assure you that if you do face it properly, the discordant strain will die away."

He got up and reached for his hat. Anne also got up, feeling queer in the knees, but at the same time conscious of the stirring of her fighting blood. Things might have been much worse than they were. She might have had to face her unknown inquisitor without any warning.

On the way back to the Justine, Cumberley tried to divert her unhappy attention by questioning her about Dick. The questions were entirely sympathetic, but they elicited more information than Anne was aware of. He learned, for instance, that this pretty and charming young girl had practically been jilted by her angry lover, that the lover was working for an appointment in the Indian Civil Service, which would have enabled them to be married, and that he could be depended upon to hold his tongue. It also dawned upon Peter Cumberley that there might be two broken hearts instead of merely one, and that this Richard Farnham was probably as much upset over the disrupted engagement as was Anne.

She was shamelessly frank about it. Her life was ruined, she said. Dick was the only man she had ever loved or ever could love, and now everything was over between them.

The man from the F. O. arched his shaggy eyebrows. Why then, he wondered, had she written love letters to Bernard Stockmar? But he did not ask the question aloud. Other women had done the same thing and were now in the bitter grip of repentance. One other, in particular, had gone to criminal lengths for the sake of that most odious man.

It is saying much for Peter Cumberley's strength of character that he could meet with smiling lips and a brave heart the cu-

rious and dangerous situation in which he himself stood. He had great courage—which was a good thing, for he needed it.

The Justine again—the same fevered mob as yesterday, with slight variations in the personnel. Old Mr. Draper with Fleurette Gracey; the Toynbee girls; young Patmore, on the prowl for Anne, and signaling his deep displeasure when she shook her head, indicating that she was engaged for this session. Vera, too, scowled at her, but was frankly curious as to the identity of her distinguished-looking companion.

"Who's Anne Cabell's new pupil?" some one asked Vera.

"New catch, more likely," Vera replied maliciously. "So that's why she slipped away, after pretending she meant to lunch here! I waited and waited for her."

Just then Lord Malcolm Chereworth joined his *fiancée*, and gave her the desired information.

"By Jove, Anne's hooked old Cumberley!" Cheery observed. "Didn't know he'd caught the dancing fever. Good Heavens, there's Freddy Veale! How's the Foreign Office running itself without those two, I wonder?"

Vera was impressed and mystified. She realized what a deep one Anne was. Cumberley and his partner were behaving like old friends, or at least like people who were well acquainted. Certainly they hadn't met for the first time this afternoon.

About the same time, as they stepped out to the inspiring rhythm of a fox trot, Cumberley said to his companion:

"You see the young man dancing with the tall, red-haired beauty?"

Anne's heart fluttered.

"Yes—that's Irene Masters. She's going on to the films, if her people will let her."

"Well, her partner is the youth I mentioned to you—Mr. Frederick Veale. He's been lifting his eyebrows at me, and I've been returning the compliment. It won't be long before he'll ask for an introduction. You aren't frightened now, are you?"

Anne let him see her eyes for a brief moment.

"Yes, I am," she confessed; "although I admit that your friend doesn't much resemble the typical Robert of the Metropolitan Constabulary. Do you mean to say that he has a warrant in his pocket for my arrest?"

"Careful! Not so loud! No—not he.

The gentleman with the warrant is probably pacing the pavement outside."

"Oo-oo!" Anne shivered.

She was sorry when the music, with a final crash and blare, abruptly ceased. It would begin again in about three minutes, but it takes less time than that to hang anybody.

Sure enough, there was the good-looking, monocled young man whom Cumberley had pointed out, making an apology to Irene Masters and beginning to drift in Anne's direction.

"Hello!"

"Hello, Freddy!"

The men exchanged careless salutations, while Anne was of two distinct minds, one of them being a powerful impulse to get up and run for dear life.

The next moment she was murmuring:

"Oh, how do you do?"

Mr. Veale said he supposed it was too early for tea, and would she give him the pleasure of the next dance?

"Nothing doing, my lad," Lord Cumberley answered for her. "Miss Cabell's ticket's filled this afternoon with yours truly."

Freddy Veale scratched his nose and readjusted his monocle. Obviously the presence of his chief embarrassed him in the fulfillment of an unpleasant duty.

"Sorry, sir—but I thought you knew," he said apologetically.

"Knew what?" Cumberley queried.

"The news we had this morning."

"What news?"

"Concerning the Stockmar case and those—well, you know what I mean."

"I haven't heard anything further. I wasn't at the office this morning. Anything special you want to speak to me about?"

"Am I in the way?" Anne asked.

"Oh, no—oh, no!" Freddy Veale raised his voice and looked dubiously at his chief. "It concerns Miss Cabell, sir. I should like to speak to her alone, if I may—I mean where there isn't such a crowd. Perhaps you had better join us, sir."

"Confound you, Freddy! I came here to amuse myself, not to talk shop."

"I'm sorry, sir, but perhaps you didn't know that Miss Cabell was Stockmar's dancing partner."

"Of course I knew it," Cumberley replied; "but what has that to do with anything—oh, well, Miss Cabell, we'll humor the lad!"

It turned out as Peter Cumberley predicted, except that Anne could not manage the giggling part of it, and looked unduly concerned and anxious.

She was very much surprised to discover that the "mystery girl"—herself, in fact—was suspected of breaking open Bernard Stockmar's cabinet for the purpose of stealing a copy of an official document of tremendous importance. How Stockmar had obtained the copy nobody knew, but it had lately come to the knowledge of the Foreign Office that he possessed it. Anne received an impression that he had been in a position to blackmail the War Office, or to betray an important secret to a rather unfriendly European power.

Things had been getting hot for Stockmar, however, and the bright inference was drawn that he had stage-managed the burglary himself, in order to pretend ignorance as to the disappearance of the document.

Peter Cumberley intervened with the cool assurance that Miss Cabell could in no wise be connected with such a plot.

"She was with me all that evening," he said. "We went to see 'Lilac Time.' Where on earth did you get this extraordinary information, Freddy?"

Poor Freddy Veale was overcome with confusion. He tried to explain, but of course it was absurd, and presently they were all laughing, even Anne. To show that there was no ill feeling, Cumberley said that Freddy could have just one dance with her at his expense.

But Freddy Veale's afternoon was utterly ruined. No, he couldn't stay any longer. He must hurry straight off to Scotland Yard. He had a lot of things to see to. He said nothing about the unexecuted warrant, and Anne wondered uneasily what would happen to it; but Peter Cumberley knew—it would be canceled, destroyed.

XVII

THE day had given Anne a great deal to think about, and she was utterly weary when six o'clock and her release from the Justine arrived.

Home was sure to be a troublesome place, too. In saying good-bye to Lord Cumberley she felt that she was parting from her best friend on earth. She felt, indeed, almost as forlorn as poor Hilda Margesson.

No, she just couldn't go home at once, although she was so tired. Instead, she

went into the telephone booth and rang up to say that she might not be back for supper. Fortunately, from Anne's point of view, the parlor maid answered her ring. It was easier to explain to Mary than it would have been to her mother.

"I'm detained," was Anne's message; "and—er—Mary, if Mr. Farnham calls, tell him he'd better not wait. I don't know exactly how late I'll be."

That would do for Dick, bless him! He had his class to-night, anyhow, but it would be like him to cut it again and come out to the Boltons, just for the satisfaction it might give him to show her all over again what a very nice young man she had lost. Well, he wouldn't have that satisfaction to-night.

Anne's chin went up when she thought of it, and of the distressing scene of last night. No more things like "Ben Bolt" for her when Dick was around! Wouldn't it be as well to acknowledge the broken engagement at once?

Pooh! What did it matter whether one did or didn't? The proud chin quivered a little, and a teardrop splashed down on Anne's cheek. She mopped it away angrily, and was drawing on her gloves when the irrepressible Vera bore down upon her.

Vera, at this moment, was the last straw. Whatever she might be going to say to Anne was nipped frostily in the bud by that young woman.

"Thank you very much for giving my photograph to that reporter," said Anne. "I suppose you know that I had refused to let him have one!"

Vera's face flamed a guilty crimson.

"Why, I—I didn't think you'd mind," she said weakly.

"This ends our friendship."

Anne was being deliberately cruel. To think of all she had suffered at Vera's hands!

"Oh, Anne!"

"I mean it. I never want to see you again as long as I live!"

"Oh, Anne!" whimpered Vera.

"I hope you're quite pleased and satisfied with what you've done to me," Anne said with cold passion; "but the next time the reporter comes to get information from you, you'd better tell him you were mistaken as to where you thought I might have been on Thursday night. Tell him to ask Lord Cumberley—if his cheek will carry him that far!"

Without waiting to see the effect of this, Anne stalked off and took the first turning into St. James's Street.

No Dick had come to escort her and quarrel with her this evening. Would it have made any difference if he had?

She was lonely—as desperately lonely as Mrs. Margesson must be. It amounted to the same thing, didn't it? Mrs. Margesson was losing a husband, and Anne Cabell had lost a husband-to-be. There was a sort of link between them.

A vision of Stockmar's sinister, handsome face came before her for a brief moment—those eyes like cold stones, that long, clear-cut profile, the sleek black hair polished to the semblance of waxed ebony. What grim games had he been playing? Such desperately clever games they must have been, to involve a man like Lord Cumberley!

"Yes," thought Anne, "I'll go and see Mrs. Margesson. The two of us are more or less in the same boat—except that she hasn't got a living soul to care very much whether she sinks or floats. Do I blame her husband?"

Well, that was a difficult question, although Anne did most vehemently blame Dick for *his* narrow-mindedness. Charles Margesson had something definite to be angry about, while Dick had merely imaginary wrongs.

The wealthy Margessons lived in South Audley Street, in a splendidly decorated tomb of a house, with servants as correct as mutes, and nothing, nothing to break the stifling monotony of luxury. If you build a tomb for a beautiful woman, and put her into it while she's still alive, what can you expect?

In the course of her meditations Anne reached South Audley Street and rang the bell at the tomb's entrance. It was opened by a middle-aged man whose expression of cadaverous melancholy suggested that he might be an undertaker interrupted in his professional duties.

Before Anne could speak, he said:

"Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Margesson is at home, miss. Mr. and Mrs. Margesson are both out of town."

"But"—Anne hesitated while the sad servitor coughed and showed a sign of wishing to close the door upon her—"Mrs. Margesson was in town this morning, and I *know* she'd like to see me. Won't you take my name to her? I'm not a reporter."

The undertaker's understudy had a few seconds of dubiety. Should he, or should he not?

"I'll find out, miss; but I'll have to ask you to wait on the steps. I can't let you inside, unless I know it's all right."

"Oh, I don't mind," Anne said, with an effort at cheerfulness. "My name's—no, I'd better give you my card, so that there won't be any chance of a mistake."

He took the card, and, with polite reluctance, gently clicked the massive door shut in her face. Anne fancied she heard a chain rattle, as if a burglar-proof bolt was being slipped into place.

Poor Hilda Margesson! Were such precautions necessary to keep out a prying world's curiosity?

Why, in London, among a certain section of so-called society, life was getting to be a regular dance of death. One could only call it that—death to love, to marriage, and to the home. Where were the little children? None in the mansion tomb of the Margessons! Perhaps something of that sort would have made a difference to Hilda—perhaps even to Charles.

The door rattled, then opened again, and the keeper of the Margesson mausoleum apologized to Anne with self-respecting brevity.

"I'm sorry, miss, but I had my orders. Madam would be very pleased indeed to see you. Miss Raikes will show you the way."

Miss Raikes, a thin, elderly person in somber black, was doubtless Hilda Margesson's maid. She had nothing to say at all until a flight of marble stairs had been ascended and a short passage followed to a door, which she opened, and then announced:

"Miss Cabell, madam."

It was a wonderful room. In the vast tomb there was at least this one place that had a look of pulsating life. A log fire crackled merrily in the marble-mantled grate. Shaded lights glowed with the warmth of little yellow suns. There were roses in silver bowls—common roses they must have been, to throw off such sweet-scented memories of cottage gardens.

And on a deeply cushioned couch a woman lay face downward, sprawled and weeping, her shoulders heaving with each miserable, heart-shaking sob.

In a second Anne was on her knees by

the couch, stroking the damp, disordered hair, clasping the distressed shoulders.

"Poor thing—poor thing! Oh, I'm so glad I came!" she said softly.

Mrs. Margesson heaved herself up.

"I'm a pest!" she exclaimed. "It was only—only—well, I wasn't crying until Raikes brought me your card. It was your kindness, Anne Cabell, that finished me. I was sitting here thinking *such things!*" She hiccuped a sob. "Charles has gone to Sunningdale for the week-end. He'll play golf all day to-morrow, and when he comes back on Monday he'll stay at his club until I remove myself. He'll be very cold and patient about it—waiting for me to get out. I shan't see him again. I'll have to see his lawyers, instead."

The unhappy woman's eyes glittered feverishly, and she clutched Anne's arm.

"Charles is *afraid* to see me," she whispered. "For all he seems so cold, so self-contained, he loves me. He's afraid he'll weaken—and yes, Anne Cabell, I love him, too. Things went all wrong with us, somehow. I know it was mostly my fault, but it was Charles's fault, too. He simply shut up like a clam when he found out what a stupid, pleasure-seeking fool I was. He let me go what I thought was my own way. Charles wanted to have a country place, he wanted children, he wanted me to golf and ride with him, and in the beginning florists' catalogues were a passion with him; but this London life was all new to me, and it was intoxicating. I'd never had any money worth talking about until I married. Oh, Anne, money—a lot of it—is the very devil!"

Anne listened gravely.

Poor Hilda Margesson! There was no paint on that lovely face—nothing but tear streaks furrowing the delicate flesh.

"And there was something else I did—something shocking," Mrs. Margesson went on. "I was blackmailed by that beast into betraying my husband. Charles doesn't know it, but any moment he may find out—or somebody else may, and it will be prison for Charles. I know him so well! He'll try to shield me, and take all the blame on himself. Charles does a lot of work with the government in a quiet way, negotiating foreign loans and that sort of thing. He's trusted with most important matters, and I betrayed him. That beast of a Stockmar! He said he'd give me back those stupid letters if I'd get him a copy of

a certain document that Charles had. I knew nothing about it myself, but I have a key to the safe where Charles keeps his papers; and one night I was absolutely desperate, and—and—well, you can guess the rest. It's in my handwriting."

Anne started.

"Did you speak to anybody about that?" she asked.

Hilda Margesson regarded her intently.

"I did, but I can't tell you who it was. I told an old friend—a man who once wanted to marry me."

"Oh!" Anne said softly.

"I told him what I had done, because he is a friend of Charles's, and if the thing came out I meant to do my best to save my husband."

"Did you tell him—this friend—why you did it?" Anne asked. "For instance, did you tell him that Stockmar had letters of yours?"

A shamed flush spread over Hilda Margesson's face.

"No, I couldn't do that. I lied—rather stupidly, as a matter of fact. I told him that I had been gambling, and had borrowed money of Stockmar, and didn't dare tell Charles."

"It's a pity you didn't tell him the truth," Anne said slowly.

Peter Cumberley, of course!

Anne was beginning to understand. If only Mrs. Margesson had confessed to everything, Cumberley would have retrieved not only that incriminating document, but her jewels and letters as well.

XVIII

As far as the public was concerned, the disappearance of Bernard Stockmar promised to be no more than the proverbial nine days' wonder. From columns, the newspaper accounts dwindled to half columns, then to paragraphs, and finally they flickered out. The interest in the "mystery girl" died also.

For one person there was a happy ending immediately in sight. Vera Gordon applied herself to her trousseau with a clear mind. Fortunately for her, she was not burdened with a sensitive conscience—although, to be sure, whenever she thought how "low down" she had played it on Anne Cabell, she felt a twinge or two. She wanted to be friends with Anne. She wanted Anne to be a bridesmaid at her wedding, and she missed Anne tremendously.

Sometimes she felt quite penitent about what she had done.

Stockmar had passed out of the daily news, but he had left the effect of his passing behind him.

"What's this I hear about your wanting to go abroad with that Margesson woman, who so thoroughly disgraced herself?" inquired Timothy Cabell over the top of his paper one evening, about a month after the storm had subsided.

Anne glanced anxiously at her mother, to whom she had confided the idea, but for once no sympathy was to be found in that quarter. Mrs. Cabell merely went on with her embroidery, her lips firmly set and her body held slightly rigid.

"Well, I've given up the Seeley Club and the Justine," Anne said defensively. "You wanted me to, didn't you?"

"What has that to do with Mrs. Margesson?" demanded her father.

"Well, I have to earn some money, don't I?"

Timothy snorted.

"Nobody has ever asked you to earn any money."

"That's just your kindness, daddy. Mrs. Margesson is a great friend of Lord Cumberley's, and—"

"Yes, and what's all this about Lord Cumberley? What business have you, an engaged woman, to be gallivanting all over the place with a man old enough to be your—your uncle? 'Pon my soul, if I were Dick! Yes, and what about Dick? He hasn't turned up for a week or more. Quarreled with him again, I suppose! Humph!"

Anne turned a little pale. It had to come out, and even her mother didn't know about Dick.

"Quarreled for the last time," she said defiantly.

Both of her parents started visibly. Timothy flung down his paper, and Mrs. Cabell laid her fancy work on the table.

"Anne, dear, do you mean you've broken off your engagement with Dick?" her mother asked.

"Oh, I think it was more or less mutual," Anne replied, with an attempt at airiness.

Her father, bitter with disillusion as regarded this pretty, spoiled child of his, looked at her with an expression of supreme disgust.

"The truth is, I suppose, you think you'll have a shot at marrying a title. You

were always ambitious, Anne! Of course it signifies nothing to you that Cumberley will never see forty again, or perhaps even fifty. I dare say Debreth could say which."

"Daddy, Lord Cumberley has been a good friend to me. I like him immensely, and he likes me, but he doesn't want to marry me."

It was now the turn of Anne's parents to look faint and white. They exchanged pathetic glances of bewilderment.

"What's he up to, then?" cried Timothy Cabell.

"Oh, daddy, don't be so old-fashioned!" Anne pleaded gently. "He isn't up to anything. As you say, he might be my uncle. He's taken me out to dinner and the theater a couple of times, and once we both went to tea at Mrs. Margesson's. He's very fond of her, and he's working hard to bring about a reconciliation between her and her husband. If ever there was an angel on earth, it's Lord Cumberley."

"Glad to hear it!" scoffed Timothy. "Making it up between the Margessons, and coming between you and as good and honest a lad as ever asked a heartless flibbertigibbet to marry him!"

"Tim!" came in mild protest from Anne's mother.

"Oh, Emmie, what's the use? We've spoiled her, and somebody will have to take the consequences. We shall, I suppose—as we deserve."

"Daddy, I'm not heartless, although I may be the other thing you mentioned. I can't help it about Dick. If you and mother spoiled me—although I'd hate to think I was ungrateful enough to let such love as yours make a horrid little beast of me—then the one who's got to take the consequences is myself, daddy. I shall suffer for whatever I've done. I don't yet know what it is I *have* done, but in your eyes it seems to be something dreadful. I always want to do what is right, and to me it seems right to go abroad for a little while with Mrs. Margesson. The fact that my own life has been rather knocked about is no reason why I should turn sour. After all, I'm young, and perhaps I'll get over it."

Only her mother noticed the quivering of her pale lips.

Timothy Cabell heaved himself out of his chair. His mind had suddenly fastened upon the idea of a strong whisky and soda, although it was his custom to have only a very weak one just before going to bed.

As it was in the beginning and would be always, he supposed, Anne was determined to be troublesome.

A pang of homesickness shot through him when he thought of Dick Farnham. Dick was much like himself, and they had settled down most comfortably in the rôles of future father and son-in-law. Timothy Cabell had trusted Dick. It had seemed to him that Anne would be very safe with that sensible young man.

Anne followed her father into the dining room and watched him anxiously as he mixed his stiff drink. Was this what she was driving him to?

"Daddy, please let me go with Mrs. Margesson," she pleaded.

"Let you!" Poor Timothy nearly exploded. "How can I stop you? If you want to go, you'll go, I suppose."

"Daddy, I'm so unhappy at home just now. Everything reminds me of—of—"

"Well, what did you want to break it off with Dick for? Don't try to pretend that you're still fond of him."

Anne's pride wouldn't let her admit that she was still very fond of Dick.

"We're not suited to each other," she said grimly.

"I told your mother some time ago that you'd lose him if you weren't careful."

Timothy drained off his glass and stalked back to the drawing-room, where he made a careful and lengthy business of lighting his pipe. If Anne was unhappy, so was he, and he didn't feel that he deserved it.

Hilda Margesson was the last straw. Timothy could feel no sympathy for such a woman. She had been publicly branded as a thief and as a traitor to her husband, and association with her could do Anne no good. The reckless conduct of some of these modern women filled Timothy Cabell with impotent rage. Where was his daughter heading? He thought he understood that broken engagement. Anne had said that it was more or less by mutual consent—which meant that Dick hadn't protested very hard. Virtually it amounted to this—Anne had been jilted. It was the beginning of her finish.

He thought of her mother as a young girl during the happy days of their own courtship. Emmie would sooner have died than link herself with a woman like Mrs. Margesson. Indeed, the Mrs. Margessons of those days never came into social contact with the Emmies; but here was Anne

—their daughter—feeling sorry for a graceless creature of that stamp. It must mean that there was something wrong with Anne—a loose fiber somewhere. From whom did she get it?

Timothy thought a little guiltily of his own father, who nowadays would probably have been landed in the divorce court for his peccadilloes; but his wife had had sense enough to know that what a man does is quite different from a woman doing the same thing. Women in these days were out to sow wild oats, and Heaven help the next generation!

Indeed, in some respects, Timothy Cabell was quite right.

That swing of the pendulum!

The trouble was that he didn't understand Anne, and her motives were obscure to him, since she had not explained them.

It had seemed to her more or less of a duty to help Hilda Margesson, since in a way she had been responsible for the woman's undoing. Mrs. Margesson was no heroic figure in Anne's eyes—far from it—but she was a pitiful one. It was impossible to stand by and refuse a hand to a woman who, without it, might be utterly lost. She was fundamentally weak, incapable of taking care of herself, but she had had a drastic lesson. If her husband consented to take her back, she would be as meek as Moses, and almost as good.

Anne could see it all—that house in the country on which Charles Margesson had once set his heart, and the children who would kindle a pure flame of joy in the heart of restless Hilda. There was still love between her and her Charles, as was proved by his refusal to see her personally, even in the office of his solicitors. He couldn't trust himself; but he had consented to see her old friend and former admirer, Peter Cumberley, and had told him that he would believe there was a little good in Hilda if a girl like "that decent little Miss Cabell" stuck by her.

Anne had been honored still further by Cumberley's complete confidence. He recognized the fact that her loyalty demanded it. He had jeopardized his high position in order to save Hilda Margesson from prison, and had taken a long time to think the thing out.

The opportunity had come when his cousin, a spinster addicted to the habit of Continental wanderings, asked him if he could possibly spare time to find her a suit-

able *pied-à-terre* in London. He had found it in the flat opposite Bernard Stockmar's; and when she came over to see and approve his discovery, Cumberley asked her to leave her key with him, so that he could go in occasionally and keep an eye on what the decorators were doing. All very simple, when one understood it. The fact that "mountain climbing" was set down in "Who's Who" as Lord Cumberley's favorite recreation explains the rest.

"And," Cumberley had said to Anne, "because I am still rather fond of that foolish woman, although it's her husband that I respect and like more, I would give a great deal not to see her wrecked."

Thus was Cumberley's appeal added to Mrs. Margesson's, and Anne, the champion of lost causes, could scarcely resist it.

For one thing, it would give her something to do—something to take her mind off her own troubles.

The last time she had dined with Cumberley, he had remarked in a casual way:

"I've had that young man you were engaged to looked up, and they tell me he was a most promising applicant, but that lately he's abandoned the course. Yesterday he was notified that a good post will be assured to him within a couple of months' time, if he cares to consider it."

Anne nodded, but said nothing. She filled her mouth with food, because her heart was full and forbade utterance. Peter Cumberley was trying to be very kind to her.

XIX

THIS matter of Mrs. Margesson! Timothy Cabell returned to it when he had lighted his pipe.

"What will you do if I say I won't let you go abroad or anywhere else with that woman?" he demanded. "What will you do if I forbid you to ever see her again?"

Anne turned very white. She had hoped to win by pleading, and it was disconcerting to have her father throw down his cards like that. She was all for diplomacy, and no self-respecting diplomat points to a spade and draws your attention to the undoubted fact that it is nothing more nor less than a spade, when otherwise it might be more politely designated as an agricultural implement. No, it wasn't fair of daddy to be so abrupt!

"I should be obliged to refuse," she said faintly.

"Humph! I thought so. And suppose we go a little farther in this matter—suppose we say that if you refuse to obey me, I am within my legal rights to forbid you a home under this roof?"

"Tim!" cried Mrs. Cabell.

"No, mother—daddy would be quite within his rights," faltered Anne.

But Mrs. Cabell paid no attention to her feeble interruption.

"Tim, you couldn't, you wouldn't do such a thing! I have some rights, too. I've been as good a wife to you as I know how, but—no, Tim. There are limits even to a wife's obedience!"

"You see the example you are setting your mother," Timothy said dryly. "It's only a case of 'suppose,' Emmie. Whatever the girl does, she can count on whipping us to heel. We're only her parents, and of course we don't know what's best for her. Her judgment is superior to ours. What do we know, anyhow—a couple of old-fashioned worms like us? That we've spent about twenty-three years of our silly lives thinking and planning for her, with the certainty that we should lose her in the end always before us—lose her in one way or another—how could that mean anything to Anne?"

Oh, but this was dreadful of daddy—sarcasm and sentiment cruelly mixed! On the whole, Anne preferred him downright. Neither in diplomacy nor otherwise was he giving her any chance at all, and she voiced her grievance tearfully:

"Daddy, you're not playing fair!"

"And are you?" he asked politely. "It amounts to this—you want your own way. I've heard Dick complain about that habit of yours. You want your mother and me to give you our blessing and let you go off with that—that unspeakable woman. Deauville, I suppose. At this time of year, Deauville is the sort of place she'd choose. Cocktail bathing parties—I see a picture paper now and again—casinos, dancing with a lot of Argentines and Greeks. No, Anne, the flesh and blood of a middle-aged male parent can't contemplate the idea with serenity."

Anne was silent. Mrs. Margesson had mentioned Deauville. Perhaps there was nothing wrong with Deauville, but obviously it was no spot to be chosen by poor Hilda at this precise moment. She couldn't live down her tale of folly in that atmosphere. No, daddy had sense on his side.

Anne's silence disconcerted him. What was going on inside that fluffy head of hers? She looked at him doubtfully, while he sucked hard at his pipe and considered the impotence of modern parents. Anne had lost no time in slipping her leash. The children's dancing classes had been the thin edge of the wedge, but it hadn't taken her long to outgrow them. Now she was thoroughly independent, and felt qualified to think for herself on matters of tremendous importance to her own future.

Finally she spoke, timidly and with an air of great deference.

"Daddy, I'll promise you one thing—it won't be Deauville," she said—as if that had been the whole point of the matter. "I'll ask Lord Cumberley to choose the quietest place possible; and unless Mrs. Margesson agrees to it, I promise I won't consider going with her."

That was Anne—get her in a tight corner and she wriggled out like an eel!

Timothy Cabell gave up the battle. Anne's mind had been made up before she went through this farce of asking her parents' permission. She had only done so to give them a chance to save the remnants of their tattered dignity. It had been a mere matter of form on her part—a politely fictitious gesture.

As Timothy had said, what a very bad example for her mother! After this, how could he hope ever again to be master in his own house?

"Children, obey your parents," meant nothing to Anne. It was something of an anomaly that Emmie, a middle-aged woman, had always regarded her marriage vow of obedience most seriously, while a chit of twenty-three could flout her father's authority at will.

"I'm going to bed," he said, ignoring Anne's hypocritical concession as to Deauville and the cocktail bathing parties.

He looked at his wife, but she was busy at her needlework again, and something stopped him from a peremptory—

"Coming, Emmie?"

One such defeat as he had suffered makes a man cautious. Emmie might reply that she wasn't coming just yet; and although Timothy disliked leaving her to Anne's unwholesome influence, he felt that there wasn't anything else to do.

Anne was certainly corrupting her mother. The process had begun with a fur coat, jade bangles, and five-pound notes.

"Humph!"

He turned and strode from the room. Then Mrs. Cabell laid aside her work again.

Anne had sunk down upon a hassock, and was staring moodily into space. She felt distinctly aggrieved. Although she had often quarreled with Dick during the stormy days of their engagement, she did not enjoy a family row. She was very fond of her father. Of course, Hilda Margesson wasn't worth what she might possibly cost. One had to take such risks for the sake of one's conscience. Anne had done more for Vera Gordon, and had been fearfully let down.

A hard little look crept into her eyes. There was just one person in the world on whom she felt that she could count—her best friend, Peter Cumberley.

She might have been mistaken when she said he did not want to marry her. Suppose he asked her to? She looked up and met her mother's pained and puzzled glance.

"It's the association that your father objects to," Mrs. Cabell said gently. "For a girl of your age, you know a great deal about the world, and I should have thought you would understand his feeling. A young girl's good reputation is her most priceless possession—at least, it was in my day. You can't have life both ways, my dear."

Anne stood up, her head thrown a little back, her hands clasped behind her—a boyish attitude slightly verging on the defiant.

"Mother, I've got to tell you something. I wanted to keep it from you, but you've forced me to tell you. Use your own discretion about telling daddy. I was that 'mystery girl' the papers had so much to say about. It was I who went to see Bernard Stockmar that night, and broke open his cabinet."

Mrs. Cabell gasped in a stricken fashion, and her eyes grew glassy with horror.

"Oh, mother dear—please, *please* don't look at me like that! I swear to you, mother, that I'm *good*—good in the way you mean. I had what I thought was a perfectly sound reason for doing what I did, but I might have landed myself in a dreadful scrape. It was Lord Cumberley who saved me. He saved me from arrest, if you must know the very worst; and now he asks me, as a favor to him, to help another woman. Don't you see that I can't refuse?"

Mrs. Cabell pressed her handkerchief to her lips and feebly shook her head.

"I don't see—I don't understand—oh, Anne!"

"Try to, dear. I can't tell you all the details, because I've pledged my word not to; but at least you must see how hard it is for me. I don't want to hurt daddy. I'm just caught in a crotched stick. Dick knows, and that's why—why things went badly between us. He didn't want me to tell you, but now I wish with all my heart and soul that I had told you in the very beginning!"

And now Anne was on her knees, sobbing, with her head on her mother's lap.

"Try to make it easier for me with daddy," she pleaded in muffled tones. "Tell him that no one will know or care who Mrs. Margesson's companion is. I'm not so important as all that. How can I refuse to try to do for another woman what was done for me by a complete stranger? How could I be so ungrateful?"

Mrs. Cabell lifted her daughter's shoulders with hands that trembled pitifully.

"Look me in the eyes, Anne. You are being truthful with me about—about what you said?" she whispered.

"I swear it, mother—on your life and on daddy's!" Mrs. Cabell shivered at that solemn oath. "I went there on behalf of somebody else, but I cannot tell you who it was. You must believe me—you can't refuse to believe me."

"Yes, I believe you," Mrs. Cabell replied. "You couldn't look at me like that—you couldn't say what you did—if you weren't telling the truth. That isn't all, either. Even if you hadn't been able to look me in the eyes—well, you would still have been my little girl. Don't ever be afraid of me, Anne! That's all I want—a promise that you'll never be afraid."

Anne gave her promise in a husky, shaken little voice. That icy hardness about her heart had melted. Peter Cumberley was still her friend, but he wasn't really her *best* friend.

"There's nothing more you have to tell me, dear?"

"Nothing more that I *can* tell you, mother. I've told you all that concerns just myself—absolutely all."

"Then I think we'd better go to bed. I shall say nothing to your father of this. It would only distress him."

Thus it was that poor Timothy was more

convinced than ever that Anne was a bad influence for her mother. Mrs. Cabell had gone over to Anne's side, and bitterly did her husband regret the weakness he had shown in leaving them together at that critical moment.

The confession to her mother had done much for Anne. Emotionally she had been in a rather dangerous condition before she made it. Life seemed to be pressing intolerably hard on her. Dick's belief that she must have been carrying on some species of intrigue with Stockmar had made her smart with indignation. Vera's turning traitor had disillusioned her. She had been on the brink of cold cynicism—a terrible thing for a young girl. Then, suddenly, the worst of her troubles disappeared as she knelt with her head in Mrs. Cabell's lap, and she felt so thankful that she had been able to give her mother that straight, honest glance of fearless innocence!

That night she prayed God always to keep her "good"—in her mother's meaning of the word—to keep her always so that she need never be ashamed to meet those loving, anxious eyes.

Much pain, however, was mixed with her thankfulness. She had lost Dick forever, and, when it came to love, "second bests" were not in Anne's line. She might not have made a satisfactory wife for Dick in every respect, but she didn't believe she had it in her to make any kind of a wife at all for any other man in the whole wide world.

"An old maid—that's to be my fate," she muttered. "Well, it's one consolation to know I shan't have any children to bring trouble on me in my old age!"

But that wasn't so much of a consolation. In the dark her lips began to twitch, and she cried a little, in a hurt, babyish way, over her spoiled life.

Well, it would be a relief to get out of London, if only to see new faces, and to try to forget one, at least, of the old!

XX

THERE was a little trouble with Hilda Margesson over the substitution of a quieter resort than the notoriously fashionable Deauville for her penitential retreat. Anne had tea with her, the next day, in the splendid mausoleum in South Audley Street. During the course of it Peter Cumberley came in.

Mrs. Margesson was more or less her former self that afternoon, the first edge of her apprehensions having worn off. While there is life there is hope, and Charles had as yet made no definite move toward the unpleasant proceedings that he had threatened. Anne suspected a friendly intrigue of some sort, in which Lord Cumberley was carrying on a part. Wasn't Cumberley seeing quite a lot of Margesson? He always seemed to have news of him, and it was for this news that Hilda hung upon every word of her old admirer.

This afternoon her lovely auburn-haired beauty was set off like a flaming passion flower on a stalk of cool, pale green. Knowing something about clothes and the price of them, Anne wondered how much that simple-seeming apple-green organdie had cost. She noted the jade necklace falling to Hilda's waist, and the big square emerald ring which Charles Margesson had bought for her after the supposed theft of her jewels. The woman, as she stood up in her smart little shoes, was worth a fortune!

Spoiled, beautiful, extravagant, but utterly miserable—a woman of the great world who had disgraced herself, and had now to pay the heavy penalty! Those tawny eyes of hers glittered feverishly, and there was only one thing they wanted to know from Peter Cumberley. She had heard a rumor of something—not from him, this time, but from a woman who had "always been after Charles," and had called on her, perhaps to gloat over her downfall.

"Anne says she won't go away with me if I choose Deauville," Mrs. Margesson informed Cumberley. "I think it's too—too cruel of her!"

"Deauville!" Cumberley was as much shocked as Anne's father. "My dear Hilda, that's out of the question for you. I'm amazed to hear that you ever contemplated such a thing."

"Why?" demanded Mrs. Margesson.

She got up and moved restlessly about, throwing glances of nervous disrelish at the cold, ordered luxury of her great drawing-room. Anne looked from her and back to Cumberley, seeking an explanation of the riddle of her stubbornness. Hadn't this retreat from London been planned with a view to something which Deauville could not offer—namely, inconspicuous quiet?

Anne thought she noticed a slight evasiveness on the part of Peter Cumberley.

"I think you know what I mean, Peter," Mrs. Margesson said slowly, when he failed to answer her.

"Well, if you know—"

"Kate Norris is going to Deauville—almost immediately."

Cumberley raised his shoulders in a slight shrug.

"I'm afraid that news doesn't thrill me specially," he said.

"And you're going—with Charles. He's decided to spend his holiday there—to forget his domestic troubles, I suppose. Kate Norris told me. She's always been after Charles. Cat Norris, I call her!"

"My dear Hilda, was there ever such a tactless woman as you are? Even if Charles and I do go to Deauville—which may or may not be the case—you'd get short shrift from him if you planted yourself in his path. Haven't you any pride?"

Mrs. Margesson considered this for a moment, and then she said firmly:

"Where Charles is concerned I haven't an atom of pride. I'm ready to grovel at his feet."

Anne shivered with an ecstatic sense of envy. If only she could feel that way about Dick!

Peter Cumberley drew down his lips in a disapproving smile.

"You women!" he exclaimed. "On behalf of Charles I accept the compliment you pay one of our unworthy sex. Hilda, do you owe nothing to me?"

Anne wondered uneasily if Lord Cumberley was going to be sentimental before a third person.

Mrs. Margesson plucked at the folds of her expensive organdie frock, crumpling it cruelly.

"You know I owe everything to you," she confessed.

"Then will you do something for me? It isn't a difficult thing I'm asking. Will you let me arrange where you and Anne are to go, and make all the plans for you? And then will you promise to keep it a dead secret? That is, don't tell Mrs. Norris or anybody who would be likely to tell Charles."

"But I want him to know," whimpered Mrs. Margesson. "I keep hoping and hoping—"

"Either you do as I ask, and keep to my directions, or I wash my hands of you now and forever afterward," snapped the "kind" man.

'Anne sighed with relief. Of course Peter Cumberley was right, and she hoped that Mrs. Margesson wouldn't persist in being a fool.

The beautiful woman pouted.

"I'm not so sure it wouldn't be a wise move for Charles to carry out his avowed intention of getting rid of you," continued Cumberley—growing kinder and kinder, it would seem.

"You were always queer!" sighed Mrs. Margesson. "I'm not so sure I didn't make a mistake when I refused to marry you, Peter. You wouldn't have given me my head, as Charles did, and then leave me in the lurch when I got into trouble!" Cumberley looked faintly amused. "I'll do what you want," Hilda went on; "but I'll never, never forgive you if you let Kate Norris get within a mile of Charles. I know how susceptible he can be!"

"Ah, Hilda, you know—that's your precious secret. I don't think many other women have ever found Charles Margesson susceptible."

Then, sharply, he outlined his plan—already formed, it seemed. He had picked the place for them to go to—a fishing village on the northern coast of France, numbering no more than four or five hundred souls, and with no big hotel at all. They were to stay in a furnished studio-villa which he had discovered through an advertisement in *Country Life*. The artist who owned it was painting in Normandy this summer.

"There are two servants in charge, and if you take your maid you won't need any more than that. I suppose you couldn't get along without Raikes?"

A passionately human gleam shot from Hilda Margesson's splendid tawny eyes.

"Yes, I could, Peter. I don't want her. Raikes knows too much. I was a poor girl when Charles married me, and I had to make my own clothes and look after myself. I'll go back to that point again, and forget all the spoiling I've had. I'll wash my face, for one thing. Oh, Anne, Anne Cabell, we'll have lots of fun! I used to know how to cook, once, and it will be wonderful fun to go into a kitchen again—especially a French kitchen. My dad was an Oxford don, and we always spent the long vacation abroad; but we hadn't enough money to make a splash, and dad would have hated it, anyhow. We always lived in villas—small, cheap ones—and I

helped with the housework. I suppose there'll be bathing, Peter?"

Cumberley nodded, and Anne thought his smile had a little quirk of sadness in it. That woman, crumpling her Poiret model so ruthlessly, running her slender fingers down the length of her jade necklace, was bringing her true self back to him—the Hilda whom he had loved before money, coupled with Charles Margesson's indulgence, had all but ruined her.

"There'll be bathing," he assured her; "and while there isn't a big hotel, there's a good little one, where you can have a meal now and then, if you tire of your own cooking."

"Does that suit you, Anne?" Mrs. Margesson asked, turning on her brightly. "You'll come now, won't you?"

"Yes," said Anne, "I'll come."

She threw a wistful glance at Peter Cumberley. He had something up his sleeve, she felt sure—something that might be destined to bring back Hilda Margesson's lost happiness. He was a magician, perhaps.

"What is it?" he asked, noticing the mute appeal of her eyes.

"Nothing—only I think you are planning a kind action."

Hilda Margesson laughed.

"He's always doing that. You can't deny it, Peter. But I shall regard it as anything but a kind action if you let Kate Norris practice her talent for husband snatching on Charles. Furthermore, you may tell Charles straight from me that if he starts any divorce proceedings, I'll drown myself!"

Anne gasped with horror, but Peter Cumberley only laughed.

"I shall tell him nothing of the sort. If I did, he wouldn't believe me. Charles isn't to be caught by that sort of chaff, my dear Hilda." Then he turned to Anne. "Now, young woman, I want you to come along with me. You and I have a little private business to attend to. That's why I ran in here to-day, hoping to find you."

Anne was mystified and Hilda was frankly curious, but Cumberley would say nothing more just then.

He had a car waiting, and he bundled Anne into it, directing the chauffeur with a nod.

XXI

"It's about Stockmar," Cumberley said, when the car moved forward. "We've

traced Hilda's jewelry to a pawnshop in the East End. It's a place we've had our eyes on for some time—that is to say, Scotland Yard has. The proprietor is undoubtedly a receiver of stolen goods, but so far he's proven too clever to catch. By the way, this is all strictly between you and me. Not a word to Hilda or to any one else!"

Anne nodded and listened, wide-eyed.

"The chief of the Yard," Cumberley went on, "has some reason to believe that Stockmar either has been murdered or has committed suicide—more probably the former. There's no evidence against him now in regard to that document, because I destroyed it—but of course he wouldn't know that—and not one of those women will ever come forward to press a charge of blackmail. They're all too frightened; but if he's caught alive, the Foreign Office will order his deportation under the Aliens' Act. He hails from Brazil, I believe. If he's been murdered, there's going to be another hue and cry after that unfortunate 'mystery girl.'"

Anne started, but Cumberley put a reassuring hand on her arm.

"You needn't be alarmed. You and I know that she wasn't connected with any gang and doesn't know what became of the fellow; but I want to ask you something—is there anything more you can tell me? Is there something you've left out of your story?"

Anne knitted her brows in silence. There was something she had left out, or allowed him to believe erroneously.

"This is what I mean—the writers of all those letters have been accounted for, except for the packet you burned. It is most vital to know about all of them, so will you please tell me whose letters you destroyed? I always believed they were your own, but I want the assurance from your own lips."

Quick as lightning the thought darted through Anne's brain that she had only to say they were her own and there would be an end of it. Certainly, if anything unpleasant had happened to Stockmar, Vera Gordon had had nothing to do with it; but in dealing with a Peter Cumberley hesitancy was fatal, even had she intended to lie to him.

"I see I made a mistake," he said. "My word, Anne, I'm glad of it! I like you, and it's been a big puzzle to me how

such a sensible young woman could have been on a par with Hilda Margesson for sheer stupidity. You went there on behalf of some one else!"

"Yes," Anne murmured.

"Out with it! Who is she?"

"I promised her I wouldn't say. Why, she doesn't even know that I went there. She doesn't know whether her letters have been destroyed or not."

"I asked you for her name," Cumberley repeated.

"Vera Gordon," Anne said reluctantly.

"Thank you! Now tell me all you know about her and her circumstances."

Anne told him. If this was being a traitor to Vera, she couldn't help it.

"And do you mean to say that you allowed your promise to this friend of yours to come between you and your young man?" Cumberley demanded, when he had got out of her all that he wanted to know.

"I couldn't give her away, after I had promised," Anne said.

"But she gave you away, or tried to! That's the same girl who made a present of your photograph to a newspaper reporter, isn't it?"

Anne agreed that he was correct.

"I don't know whether to admire you or not," Cumberley said, with a slow smile.

All the time they had been talking the big car was taking them eastward. At this point in their conversation it turned off from Holborn into a street which led diagonally into Farringdon Street, and thence to Ludgate Hill. Anne suddenly realized that Cumberley had some definite object in view other than the cross-examination she had just undergone. She looked at him questioningly.

"We're going to the pawnshop of this fellow I told you about," he informed her. "You've had a valuable ring stolen, and the police have given you a list of pawnshops where it may possibly be found—that's all. I want you to tell me afterward if you've ever seen the fellow who runs the place before. He's a youngish man—not a Jew, but a foreigner of sorts—and it's strictly a one-man business. I want to know if you've ever seen him with Stockmar. He claims that the Margesson jewelry was pledged by a fashionably dressed woman who was quite unknown to him."

Anne's heart began to beat fast with excitement. She felt very proud, too, to be "working" with Lord Cumberley. Al-

ways, in common with plenty of other people, she had wondered how officialdom set to work to unravel the tangled threads of mysteries.

For instance, there was one form of police court testimony which had consistently baffled her. It would run in this wise—a detective giving evidence of arrest would say, as reported in the papers:

"I was standing outside the So-and-So Hotel when the prisoner came out, and I asked him if he was John Doe. He then admitted his identity."

How, Anne had wondered, did a detective with a warrant in his pocket for John Doe's arrest happen to be idling in front of that particular hotel at an unlucky moment for the prisoner?

She knew now. It had very nearly happened to her at the Justine; and now, for the time being, she was a part of that vast machinery which operates for the protection of law-abiding people. It must also operate for the protection of a man like Bernard Stockmar, and for his avenging, if necessary.

"Have the police any idea who really pawned the jewelry? Or mustn't I ask that?"

"They have a sort of an idea that it was Stockmar himself," Cumberley replied.

"Before he finally disappeared?"

"Exactly, my dear. What a brain you have!"

"And then what happened?" Anne asked, for she wanted the story to go on.

"I said you had a brain. Perhaps you'll tell me, because it would be useful."

His gentle sarcasm brought a nervous giggle from Anne. Heavens, how excited she was!

The long July twilight was waning in a sultry fashion.

Limehouse—but here a breath of salt air swept up from the sea, to do royal battle with the stench of slums and the ebb tide. Yellow men, furtively businesslike, trotted by on their mysterious affairs. Spicy oriental smells came hotly from the foreign shops and Chinese restaurants, mingling with the truly British invitation to fried fish and chips. Trams clanged, and little children with slant eyes gazed incuriously upon the passage of Lord Cumberley's Rolls-Royce.

Then the car slowed up and stopped at the corner of a small and very mean street which curved abruptly down to the river.

"We've got to walk a little way," Cumberley said. He took something from one of the door pockets of the car and slipped it into his own pocket—a small, black glistering thing, the sight of which sent a thrill down Anne's spine.

A man conspicuous for a tweed cap, a long green overcoat—although it was summer—and a pair of noticeably large feet, was idling by the curb. He touched his cap with two fingers and drifted along behind them. Anne looked a little surprised, but Cumberley enlightened her.

"It's all right—a friend of mine. I don't want to be cut off in the flower of my youth without somebody's making a protest. Now, have I frightened you?"

"Not a bit," Anne replied stoutly. "I'm simply wild with excitement. I wouldn't turn back now for untold gold!"

"That's the spirit! Life will give you a splendid run for your stake in it, my child. The great rewards go to the plucky people. You were plucky enough when you went to Stockmar's flat that night!"

XXII

THEN they walked on in silence.

It was a badly lighted little street, and its narrow sidewalks were lined with small, mean houses. As most of the doors were open, one caught glimpses of strange interiors. Here and there a gas street lamp flared sulkily, and children like dingy moths clustered about in the feeble radiance, playing shrill but purposeless games. In one doorway sat an aged Chinese woman, tinkling a stringed instrument resembling a lute.

The green-coated man kept a reasonable distance behind them, but the tread of his substantial feet had a reassuring sound.

Another turn, and they came under the dense shadow of a huge warehouse. Here the street widened out into a sort of courtyard, with the wall and the locked gates of the warehouse on one side, and several shops and a public house adjoining. The sucking pull of the tide could be heard somewhere quite close, although the river was hidden by the warehouse wall.

"Here we are," said Cumberley.

They stopped before a dingy little shop window, in which was displayed an untempting collection of rubbish—old watches, bits of cheap jewelry, tarnished and worn plate which even in its best days had been of no great value, and a good

many marine curios and sailors' sacrificed treasures. Three balls which might once have been gilded hung over the entrance.

When Cumberley opened the door, a bell clanged furiously. They went in, and as they did so a woman entered hurriedly from a room behind the shop.

She was a young, pale-faced woman with black hair and a Jewish cast of feature. She showed traces of having possessed at one time quite a remarkable beauty.

For a brief second she stared at the visitors, and then—with a curious, nervous gesture, and before Cumberley could speak—she said:

"Excuse me, please!"

She dashed back into the room from which she had emerged, and they heard her call:

"Fredo, where are you? Some one in the shop!"

Cumberley touched Anne's foot with his, as a warning, and began to talk casually. He had an instinctive idea that they were being closely observed from some concealed point of vantage.

"Of course, my dear child, you may not find your ring here, or anywhere else. As I told you, it's more likely than not that whoever stole it removed the stones from the setting."

"Oh, dear!" Anne exclaimed plaintively, acting up to his hint. "I dare say you're right, but I hope not!"

Then the door at the back opened again, and this time a man appeared behind the counter. He, too, was young, or fairly so, and dark, with a nose like a hawk's and a pair of deep-set but penetrating eyes.

"Yes?" he inquired. "Is this the young lady who lost a ring? A three-stone diamond I think you said, sir?"

His face seemed sleepily indifferent as he turned to a ramshackle little safe at the back and brought out a tray crowded with quite a different display from that shown in the window.

"Here's the only one I've got that answers to your description," he said, holding out a small affair worth, at a pawnbroker's estimate of values, about five pounds.

Anne shook her head.

"No—that's not mine. The stones in mine were much bigger."

The young man nodded casually.

"I didn't think it would be. This was pledged by a girl I know—an honest girl, as you might say. That is, she isn't a thief.

I'm very careful what I take in, but of course, like everybody else, I get had now and then."

A faint gleam came from the deep-set eyes, and the young man smiled superciliously. Anne wondered if he knew who Lord Cumberley was, and if he also knew the occupation of the green-overcoated person, who at that moment had his nose glued to the window of the pawnshop, apparently lost in admiration of the tawdry display it contained.

"Thank you very much," said Cumberley. "Sorry to trouble you again so soon. We couldn't trace the woman whose name and address you gave us in that other matter."

"Oh, she must have been a wrong un," the young man replied placidly. "As I said, I sometimes get had, like everybody else."

Was there something pointed in that reiterated statement? He had the manner of a hardened card player sitting behind a poker hand. Any one less ruffled or anxious it would be difficult to find.

"Well, good evening," said Cumberley. "Come along, my child."

"Good evening," the young man replied with a sleepy sort of courtesy.

As they left the shop, he was returning the tray to his ramshackle safe.

Anne was bursting to speak. As soon as the bell clanged behind them, she turned impetuously to her companion, but Cumberley checked her abruptly.

"Not here—not a word!" he said, his voice lowered, but sharp.

So in silence they began to retrace their way back, the green-overcoated man keeping pace a few yards behind; but presently he overtook them and spoke in a casually advisory manner.

"I should walk in the middle, my lord," he said.

Cumberley took Anne's arm, and, without comment, led her off the sidewalk on to the roughly paved street, through which, so far, there had been no traffic at all. Scarcely had this happened when from somewhere behind them came a sharp, cracking explosion, followed by a woman's scream.

"Run, my lord!" shouted the man in the green overcoat.

He himself turned and ran back in the direction from which they had come, blowing a police whistle as he went.

Peter Cumberley made no bones about taking his detective's advice. He had pretty Anne Cabell in his care, and, while he didn't know just what was afoot, he suspected that it might be a dangerous game.

The street sprang to life in an instant. Heads popped out of windows and doorways. There were more shrill whistles and the sounds of hastening footsteps.

At last Peter Cumberley and Anne reached the corner where they had left the car. He pushed her into the vehicle with scant ceremony.

"My chauffeur will take you home safely," he said, a little breathless. "I must go back and find out what's happening."

"Wait!" gasped Anne. "I must tell you something. That woman who came into the shop and ran out again—that woman was Bernard Stockmar's wife."

"What?"

"I'm telling you. I know her as—as well as I know you," Anne replied.

XXIII

ANNE gave the chauffeur her address, and he proceeded to turn the car homeward. She leaned back in a corner, tingling from the strange and hazardous adventure she had come through.

What was happening back there in that mysterious street of polyglot people? She wished Peter Cumberley hadn't sent her off like this, but he never even gave her a chance to argue about it. She hadn't been afraid or inclined to run away. At the time she thought it was Cumberley who was afraid, but of course she should have known better.

A short distance up the Commercial Road she drew the chauffeur's attention through the speaking tube. He stopped the car and came to the door to answer her.

"Couldn't we go back?" Anne asked. "I don't like leaving Lord Cumberley alone."

The chauffeur, a red-haired Irish boy, grinned at her.

"Sorry I am, miss, but it 'd be more than the worth of me job to disobey his lordship's orders; and it's not a job like mine you'd be after wanting me to lose."

"Oh, well!" grumbled Anne.

Back there in that mean little street, the name of which she did not know, something dramatic had happened.

The car moved on again, and Anne fell

to thinking of Stockmar's wife—or the woman who had once been his wife.

They had never exchanged more than perfunctory greetings, but of course Netta Stockmar knew who Anne was. Once a week, on pay nights, the shabby and prematurely faded young woman had come to sit in the foyer at the Justine to wait until she got on her husband's nerves—at which point he would give her money. If he didn't give her what she thought was enough, she would go on waiting until he made up the proper sum.

What on earth was Netta Stockmar doing in that dubious pawnshop in Limehouse place which had received Mrs. Margesson's jewelry? What could it possibly mean?

And here was Anne Cabell, coming straight from that scene of intrigue and mystery to the quiet precincts of the Boltons, in South Kensington!

She laughed grimly.

It would be after nine o'clock before she got home. She could picture her father at this moment, fuming and furious, and her mother, slightly anxious; but poor mother was well broken into anxiety by this time. She knew that in the end Anne was likely to turn up with some excuse, reasonable or otherwise.

Presently Anne's thoughts turned to the queer, sleepy-faced man called Fredo, who had repeated with emphasis his remark about being had now and again, the same as everybody else. Whom did he mean—himself, or the police, or just nobody in this particular instance? Had the shot and the woman's scream come from the pawnshop? Those were all burning questions to Anne.

She had never seen the man before, either in Bernard Stockmar's company or otherwise. Netta's pale, frightened face haunted her. Everybody at the Justine had felt sorry for Stockmar's wife, assuming, without actually knowing it, that he illtreated her. On that fatal evening Stockmar had told Anne that Netta and he had separated—had been divorced, in fact; but that might not have been true. She had shown herself to be a very dog for patience.

As Lord Cumberley's car carried her nearer and nearer the decorous precincts of home, poor Anne became occupied with the story she would have to tell. Her unofficial connection with the Secret Service

gave her a lot of trouble in the matter of veracity, but she was in it now, and the thing couldn't be helped.

Should she say that she had been with Mrs. Margesson, and let it be inferred that she had dined there? Unfortunately Anne had a healthy appetite, and as it was now long past dinner time, she was hungry.

The car slipped into the Boltons before she had any sort of story ready; and there on the doorstep—as he had been that fatal night—stood Dick Farnham, apparently on the point of leaving the house.

Anne hadn't expected to see Dick. He had not called for several days, and he did not know that Anne had informed her parents of the broken engagement.

He watched her get out of the car—the car that had a two-thousand-guinea look—while the chauffeur held open the door for her and touched his cap. There was something sullen but also more or less pathetic in Dick's expression. That was how Anne had slipped away from him, and from the modest future they had planned together—by way of the Justine, the Seeley Club, and a two-thousand-guinea car!

"Hello!" she said, seemingly quite cheerful and unconcerned.

He gave her a gloomy nod.

"Your father and mother have gone to a concert," he said stiffly, "so there's really no need for me to come in."

Heavens, what a lucky thing! Now Anne remembered, of course. Her father had had those tickets for the Beethoven Festival for a month. Being hopelessly old-fashioned in his musical tastes, Beethoven was his favorite composer among the classics. They would have had high tea, dad and mother, and would have been off before Anne was expected home.

Anne still found it difficult to forgive Dick's ready acceptance of what on the face of it seemed plain proof that she had been engaged in an erotic affair with Bernard Stockmar. She told herself angrily that Dick ought to know better, and that if it was in him to believe she was that kind of a girl, then he wasn't the man she wanted to marry. Only those whom we love most have any real power to hurt us. Thus it was between Dick Farnham and Anne Cabell.

"No, I don't suppose there is any need for you to come in," she said, her strong little chin tilted at an ominous angle. As he would have taken her at her word, she

added hastily: "Oh, yes, I forgot—you must come in for a minute."

How could she know that his heart fairly leaped with hope when she said that? It didn't show in his face, however, for suddenly he thought of the car with the two-thousand-guinea look. In some indefinite way the chauffeur had conveyed an impression that this wasn't the first time he had driven Miss Cabell.

"Go into the drawing-room," said Anne. "I'll be with you in a moment."

Some food was set out for her on a tray in the dining room, but she had got over feeling hungry. Her eyes glittered feverishly as she rushed up to her room. What would happen now, she wondered? Dick wasn't happy. Perhaps he would—

But she wouldn't let herself be won back too easily—not she! He had humiliated her deeply that afternoon in the park, and, while she did not want to humiliate him as a mere matter of revenge, she did feel that she was worth the trouble of some impassioned wooing.

The sight of him brought home to her the poignant fact that life without Dick wouldn't be worth living, as far as she was concerned. At best, she would drag through the rest of her days no more than half alive.

A pang of tender pity stirred in her breast for all those women whom love has passed by—the plain women with hearts of warm gold, the self-sacrificing women who are like misguided angels, the too proud women. Ah, Anne, ask yourself—will you be one of those who are too proud, needlessly self-sacrificing, or foolishly loyal to an unworthy friend?

"I hope not," was her mental reply; "but at least I must be loyal to myself, for without that I should be no good to anybody else."

Loyalty to one's self may be a bitter, lonesome business, because nobody else knows, and in time nobody else cares—that is, no human soul. Then even God may seem to have forsaken one, and apparently nothing is left but the bitterness and the loneliness.

But pretty Anne Cabell wasn't thinking as far ahead as that. She was only thinking that Dick would have to atone pretty handsomely for his lack of faith in her.

XXIV

WHEN she came back, Dick was standing at the long windows that opened upon

the garden. There was no moon—what a pity! It was all black out there.

At the sound of her footsteps he turned and faced her. She noticed with a little thrill that his arms were held rigid and his hands clenched.

Anne, though young, had an old, old instinct inherited from the remotest of her feminine ancestors. She knew by those rigid arms and clenched hands that Richard Farnham still loved her.

That old instinct, however, may have not only the wisdom of the serpent behind it, but also a serpent's wiles. She held out a little palm in which there glittered that fated betrothal ring.

"You can take it now," she said. "I've told dad and mother that we aren't going to be married. We don't have to keep up the pretense any more. It will be a relief, won't it?"

"You may be right," Dick said gravely; "but I don't want your ring. I gave it to you—but of course you don't want it, either."

Anne gulped and smiled icily.

"It isn't much of a ring, is it?" Dick went on. "It only cost—"

"Please *don't!*" she cried.

"Very well! Give it to me, if it isn't of any further use to you."

Anne dropped it into his hand, and he dropped it into his pocket.

"That's that," he said.

Still he made no move to go. He looked around the room with a cold, aloof expression, taking good care to keep his eyes away from Anne. It seemed that she was of less interest to him than the familiar and comfortably shabby furniture.

She longed to ask him to sit down, but that would look like something more than mere hospitality. It might have been construed into an invitation to reconsider the smashed engagement.

"There's something I wanted to tell you," he said finally. "You and I will probably never meet again, and—and it's good-by now. I wish you the best of luck, Anne. I got that Indian appointment rather sooner than I expected, and I'm going out in about six weeks' time. At first I gave up the idea entirely, but some one came along and decided to move me up in the list—why, Heaven alone knows. Still, there it is, and I'm going."

Anne gulped and nodded. She knew, of course, who that some one was, but it

wasn't likely that Dick knew. At that moment she wasn't sure whether she was grateful to Peter Cumberley or hated him.

"It's—it's splendid, Dick," she managed to say. "I surely do congratulate you, but you deserve the best. I—I hope you'll be happy."

"Happy! Ha, that's good!"

He threw back his head and laughed cruelly.

"Dick—please, please forgive me!"

Then she was crying, and he was holding her arms and looking searchingly at her.

"If I thought you cared an atom for me—" he began. Then he remembered the car, which to him had fairly shrieked big money, and the chauffeur, who had undoubtedly driven Anne before. "Whose car brought you home to-night?" he demanded, with a distinct change of tone.

"It belongs to a friend of mine," Anne replied. "His name is Lord Cumberley."

Dick dropped her arms as if suddenly conscious of claspings something poisonous. He took a couple of steps backward.

"It was Cumberley, of the Foreign Office, who rushed through my appointment," he said harshly. "I've never seen the fellow, but I was told the name of my unknown benefactor."

"Yes, I—I know," murmured poor Anne.

"My God, what was that for? To get me out of the way? You were at the bottom of it, I suppose! Have you discussed our unfortunate affairs with this man?"

"Oh, Dick, you make me wild!" Anne stamped her foot. "It was just kindness on Lord Cumberley's part. He's the kindest man I know."

Dick reached for his hat and strode to the door, where he turned.

"You can thank your kind Lord Cumberley from me, and tell him to take himself and his patronage to the devil!"

"Dick!"

But he gave her no further chance.

When the front door slammed heavily behind him, Anne sat down and laughed hysterically.

Hadn't she told mother and dad that Dick and she had quarreled for the last time? Well, this at least did look like being the last time.

What right had Dick to go for her in that ridiculous fashion? Apparently he still considered himself entitled to try to order her about.

Anne's laughter ended on a tearful note. Now Dick would probably feel it his pleasant duty to insult Lord Cumberley.

XXV

MEANWHILE what was happening down in that strange courtyard under the shadow of a riverside warehouse?

If Anne could have projected herself to Limehouse at that moment, her attention would have been diverted from her personal troubles. She would have seen, first of all, Peter Cumberley stepping briskly back in the direction of the pawnshop. By magic all the orientals seemed to have disappeared, slithering ratwise to their numerous warrens. Whatever had happened, they did not want to be in it—or, indeed, anywhere in the neighborhood. Experience of raids upon gambling houses and opium dens had made them shy of the police.

A shot—a woman's scream—that might mean murder. On the other hand, it might only mean some Saturday night domestic argument, or the accidental explosion of a gas oven. There were all sorts of possibilities, but the yellow-faced denizens of Chinatown preferred to be on the safe side until word reached their obscure retreats that it was definitely this, that or the other.

Consequently the laundrymen worked on placidly at their ironing boards behind carefully drawn blinds, as if deaf from their birth. The fat yellow tradesmen dozed behind their counters, or, with great concentration, totaled up the day's gains or losses on long grayish scrolls with a little paintbrush, instead of a pen, dipped into what is known to the world of artists as Chinese black. The old woman twanging her lute-shaped instrument had closed her door. No more musical publicity for her, for the moment! The white mothers of slant-eyed children called their offspring in from the street and presumably put them to bed.

But the hardy curiosity of the British element rose triumphant above such modest self-effacement. There were plenty of street loafers, riverside workers—some of them interrupted in the midst of their weekly shave—and stout middle-aged matrons with their hair already in the Sunday curling pins, to swell the gathering tide that surged into the *cul-de-sac* by the river.

Even before Peter Cumberley reached the spot, the police were in charge. Obviously this was no case of an exploded gas oven. As he had rather expected, the

pawnshop was the scene of the affair. The green-overcoated detective was already inside, and two constables stood at the door, while against the dingy shop window there was no more room for a single face. Yet the crowd outside could have seen nothing, for the room behind was in blank darkness.

"I allus said 'e'd do 'er in, an' now 'e's done it!" croaked an excited old woman.

"Go on, officer—be a sport! What 'as 'appened?" pleaded the publican of a nearby house of refreshment.

But neither constable replied to the subtle blandishment of being addressed as "officer." They merely stood their ground with a manner of stolid superiority, gazing over the heads of the less enlightened—or possibly even they didn't yet know what had happened.

A little bearded man carrying a black bag had a way made for him by a police sergeant.

"That's Dr. Grimes!"

"There goes the doctor!"

"Perhaps she ain't dead," said the old woman, with a disappointed note in her croak.

"Oh, they 'ave to 'ave the doc to make sure," the publican consoled her. "Dead all right—the doc 'll see to that!"

A nervous titter swept the little crowd, followed by hushed speculative mutterings.

"Doctor's gone into the parlor," announced one of the window pressers. "There's a light in there."

Then screams broke out—shriek after shriek, but muffled, from behind the closed door.

"Oh, Gawd, she *ain't* dead! Poor soul, poor soul!" cried one of the curling-pinned matrons. "Do you remember, Liz, how poor May Pepper screamed that night when Joe the Lascar knifed her? Gawd, I'd say it was the same. Fair curdles your blood!"

"Look out, Alice! Stand aside, carn't yer? Here's the toff back again. I seen him and a young lady go out not ten minutes ago."

The curling-pinned matron stood aside, regarding Peter Cumberley with shrewd little black eyes, in which dwelt both wisdom and cunning. Who was this "toff," anyway? Another spectator remembered having seen him a few days ago.

He spoke to one of the constables, who regarded him dubiously. Not every member of the force knew Lord Cumberley by sight; but before the doubter could make

inquiries the green-overcoated detective came to the door and settled the question.

"Oh, you've come back, my lord! I was just going to telephone."

Cumberley nodded, and followed him into the pawnshop, where they stood for a moment talking, in the illumination afforded by the detective's electric torch.

That, perhaps, was the moment which would have resulted in a *crise de nerfs* for Anne Cabell, had she been able to project herself into the scene. It was just as well that she could not do so—just as well that Lord Cumberley's chauffeur liked his job too well to risk losing it.

Naturally, Cumberley's first question was as to what had happened.

"A man has shot himself," the detective replied.

"Ha!" commented Cumberley.

So the sleepy-faced Fredo had been wide awake all the time! He must have had a thoroughly guilty conscience about something or other.

"And the woman who screamed?"

"His wife, I believe. She isn't able to make a coherent statement yet. All we've got out of her is that after you and the young lady left, he picked up a revolver, placed it to his head, and fired."

"H-m!" Cumberley observed. "I wonder if—well, I'd better go in and see his wife."

The detective pushed open the door of the room which the doctor had entered a few moments before—the room behind the shop—and Cumberley went in, to receive one of the greatest shocks of his career.

There, sitting in a red plush rocking-chair, looking only slightly paler than when he had last seen him, sat Fredo, the supposed corpse. Not only was he not dead, but he looked thoroughly wide awake now. At a door leading to a third apartment stood another member of the constabulary.

Cumberley gave a startled grunt.

"Oh, I thought it was this man," he said, when he recovered himself.

"No, it's—well, you'd better see him, my lord. I'm pretty sure, but not absolutely. The woman has said nothing."

At that point the woman came down a narrow flight of stairs which led directly to the second room—the living room or parlor. She was not screaming now, but her eyes blazed with terror, and she held a handkerchief crushed to her mouth. The man in the rocking-chair got to his feet.

"You be careful, Netta!" he said. "Here, sit down—and no more yelling!"

His voice was much kinder than the words would suggest. As she looked at Cumberley, and seemed about to speak, the man repeated:

"You be careful! Keep your mouth shut for a bit. It's safer."

"The body is in there, my lord," the detective said coldly, indicating the inner room, which proved to be a kitchen.

They went in, closing the door behind them. The little bearded doctor and the police sergeant were both on their knees on the floor, carefully examining the huddled figure that lay there. The fingers of the figure's right hand were still locked in the trigger of an old-fashioned revolver, and the sergeant was engaged, at the moment, in the delicate and not too safe task of removing the weapon from that lifeless but fairly tenacious grip.

Cumberley gave one look, then nodded to his henchman.

"It's Bernard Stockmar," he said. "He thought we knew he was here—that's why he did it. If we had caught him alive, he'd have expected to get about a twenty years' sentence for one of the most cowardly crimes of blackmail any man has ever committed. I suppose his wife has been hiding him."

That, as it proved, was exactly what had happened.

Returning at midnight to his flat, to find his cabinet broken open and Anne mysteriously missing, Stockmar had discovered that more was missing than the girl whom he had thought to trap.

The document which he had forced Hilda Margesson to copy for him had such significance that his possession of a copy could only be explained by Mrs. Margesson on the score of the most ruthless blackmail. Dreading exposure, he had taken her jewels to supply his material needs, and, after telling the porter that he was on his way to the police, had vanished temporarily into this underworld retreat, which he knew would receive and hide him.

Who was the man Fredo?

The police never discovered anything definite against him, but undoubtedly he was also one of the "undesirables," and an order for his deportation was made. Stockmar's widow went with him—not as a widow, but as Fredo's wife.

Perhaps Stockmar had even blackmailed

Fredo. Anyhow, Scotland Yard and the Foreign Office both took a broad view of his case.

Anne Cabell was in France when she heard the end of it, and she heaved a sympathetic little sigh on behalf of her who had once been Netta Stockmar. Perhaps there was some happiness in store for Netta. Every one who had known and pitied her must have hoped so.

XXVI

It was September, and Anne and Hilda Margesson had passed a month in Equihen, the little Picardy fishing village that Cumberland chose for them, when the English papers gave Anne the news that Vera Gordon was now Lady Malcolm Chereworth, and that the newly wedded couple were spending their honeymoon in Venice.

So much for Vera! She had got what she wanted, and it would be foolish to begrudge her her happiness just because it had been obtained at great cost to other people. That wasn't exactly Vera's fault. If anybody's, it was Anne Cabell's.

Anne was a poor hand when it came to holding resentment. She wrote a kind little note to Vera, and sent a present with it. Bygones were bygones. The Bernard Stockmar affair was closed now and for eternity, and so, Anne hoped, were her own activities on behalf of Scotland Yard and the F. O.

She had plenty to do in looking after Hilda Margesson. Mrs. Margesson was one of those women who, when they are unhappy, lift up their voices and howl about it. She wanted her Charles, and it wasn't enough for her that as yet he hadn't begun those threatened "proceedings." She wanted him most dreadfully. She wrote him plaintive letters—all of which came back to her apparently unopened, accompanied by firm reprimands from his solicitors for continuing to annoy him; but she went on writing, because of a discovery she had made. Charles Margesson had been unable to resist the sight of her handwriting, and each one of those returned fat envelopes had been steamed open and resealed. It was unthinkable that the dry-as-dust old solicitor's clerk had committed such a trick.

When Hilda's tears gave out, she sprinkled water on the pages of her impassioned appeals for forgiveness, and liberally smudged them. Sometimes she insisted

upon reading certain touching passages aloud to Anne—which was very distressing for the latter.

"You ought to have more pride!" Anne would exclaim in disgust. "I wouldn't beg any man on earth to take me back, no matter if—if—"

"I haven't any pride," Hilda would reply. "After all, we're married. Charles is my husband, and it's just as fair for a husband to forgive his wife now and then as for women to forgive men. If he's carrying on with that Norris woman, I'll have her blood. Why doesn't Peter answer my letters? At least he hasn't anything to forgive."

"Perhaps he's angry with you because you broke your promise," Anne said, on this particular occasion, when the eternal topic presented itself.

"What promise?" Hilda asked blankly.

"Don't you remember Lord Cumberland said we were not to tell any one where we were staying—particularly any one who might give it away to your husband?"

"Well, he couldn't expect me to keep such a promise. It's ridiculous!"

"I think he had some plan in his mind, and you've spoiled it," Anne said.

"What do you mean? Oh, Anne, Anne, what have I done?"

"I don't know for certain," Anne replied; "but what I think is that Lord Cumberland meant to bring your husband here and let him just run across you by accident. You couldn't miss running across anybody in this place; but now that you've been writing to Mr. Margesson, probably wild horses wouldn't be able to drag him here."

Hilda's beautiful face quivered tearfully.

"Charles is a stubborn brute!" she wailed. "Well, I'll break some more of that stuffy old promise. I'll go to Deauville to-morrow!"

"Then you'll go alone," Anne said firmly. "Besides, you don't know that Mr. Margesson is at Deauville. Your only communication with him is through the solicitors."

Hilda sighed and gave it up.

Yet there were times when her natural gayety asserted itself. It was fun playing at being an artist in the painter's picturesque villa-studio. It was good fun to go into Boulogne with string bags, and market, and recapture an almost lost talent for cookery.

The two young women bought bright-colored fabrics and made quaint dresses for themselves, copying the original styles set by the wives and models of the real artists, who swarmed over the rocky beach or strolled the countryside in the wake of men with broad-brimmed hats and easels. They wore gay silk handkerchiefs bound around their hair in lieu of more conventional headgear, and beach sandals, sans stockings. They grew lithe and sunburned climbing the steep hill from the beach; and the beach itself was the most fascinating thing of its kind in the world, except for some parts of the Cornish coast.

There were rocks and pools, where all manner of discoveries were to be made when the tide was out, and a hard expanse of yellow sand, where the children played cricket and ring tennis and danced, as well as built their forts and castles.

That, if anything, was the fault of Equihen. Those artists possessed the most terrific families. There were children of all ages, from the infant of a few months, who accommodately slept in his "pram" while his mother took her sea dip, up to the beautiful young flapper and the man of seventeen.

Hilda Margesson watched them with a great pain in her lovely tawny eyes, and when a mother would say politely, "Well, they *are* a great care—and if you haven't any, you probably don't miss them," she would just shake her head and try to smile.

She was so good at games with the children that these same mothers pitied her a little behind her back, wondering if she didn't realize, after all, what she herself was missing.

They didn't pity Anne. That charming girl would marry soon, and she looked the sort whose nursery would begin to fill up pretty promptly. From the gurgling heir in his "pram" to the man of seventeen and his elders of almost any age, the whole unattached male population was in love with Anne Cabell. She could have had any or all of them for the giving of one little smile of encouragement.

How different this was from the overheated and overscented atmosphere of the Justine!

These people were mostly poor, but they were happy and terribly industrious. Even Hilda Margesson, who had sat through her married days in a state of that idleness which is said to be Satan's opportunity,

suddenly discovered that she had not forgotten how to mend and darn; and the mothers of big families soon learned to anticipate her approach with the little work basket that she had bought in Boulogne.

One day a letter did arrive from Peter Cumberley, but it was not for Hilda, and fortunately she was not present when Anne took it from the postman.

Anne went into the garden to see if it was the sort of letter which could be shown to Hilda before saying anything about it. No, it wasn't!

Cumberley wrote:

That incredibly stupid woman! She has bungled the whole thing. I imagined that you guessed what was in my mind, but Charles Margesson has heard from her, knows where she is, and won't compromise his dignity by letting me lead him to Equihen—although I may say I've got him as far as Le Touquet. On Tuesday we are going to Hardelet for golf, and will lunch at a little place called the Pré Catalan. That's about three or four miles from you as the crow flies.

A word to the wise, Anne Cabell, is sufficient, I believe, and you have your moments of wisdom; but to be quite definite about it I am sick of Charles's undiluted company, and I long for a sight of your agreeable face.

Tuesday—and to-day was Tuesday! Anne went into the house and found Hilda moping.

"I have an idea that I've got a fit of the blues coming on," Mrs. Margesson said anxiously.

"Then I think we ought to do something to head it off, if possible," Anne replied with great good humor. "What about a cross-country walk? I've heard of a little place near Hardelet Castle where we could have lunch."

"Oh, Anne, I could never walk all that way!"

"But you could walk one way, and we'll probably be able to hire a cart or something to bring us back. There's nothing like a stiff walk to cure the blues, and you've been sitting about sewing far too much lately."

"It's so hot!" Hilda complained.

"Most of the way will be through the forest," Anne said. She didn't add what she had discovered—that it was far hotter in the pine forest than on the dunes. "Anyhow, I'm going, and it would be so much nicer for me if you came, too."

"You've got a good heart," Hilda said with a wistful sigh. "It's so kind of you not to be hateful to me now and then, because I know what a trial I am. Charles

always spoiled me. All right—I'll come with you."

Anne was glad to have it settled so naturally. She felt that it would be better to say nothing to Hilda about Cumberley's letter. Something might happen to prevent the rendezvous he hinted at, and that would be unnecessarily cruel to Hilda, if she had been led to expect it. Besides, she was so naïve that she wouldn't be able to conceal the fact that there had been something in the nature of a plot.

"I think we'd better wear stockings," Anne said, as they began to make their preparations; "and hats. Hardelet's more conventional than Equihen."

Hilda's eyes gleamed mischievously.

"But wouldn't it be fun to shock them?"

"It might be for you," Anne had the wit to reply, "but you see I earn my living from people who might object to being shocked in just that way. You never know whom you're going to meet in this neighborhood at this time of year. There's no harm in being simple-lifers here, because everybody's the same, but I don't think we ought to overdo it where we might be making ourselves conspicuous."

Hilda gave her a quick little hug.

"You're right, of course—and I'm a selfish beast, also of course. I never see anybody's side of anything but my own!"

Anne smiled secretly. The truth of it was that Hilda Margesson didn't always see the side of things that was to her own advantage. Anne could well imagine Charles's feelings, and perhaps Peter Cumberley's, if two bare-ankled gypsies with gay handkerchiefs knotted about their heads turned up at the Pré Catalan, to be recognized by the men as rather intimate acquaintances.

So they donned woolen stockings and brogues and sweater suits, and the "pull on" hats dear to feminine golfers. They took walking sticks—*très Anglais*, indeed!—and then set forth to perspire through well over three miles of sandy, stifling forest, where not a breath of air stirred, and the effect was that of a pine-scented Turkish bath.

Hilda grumbled at first, and then resigned herself to the joke of it. Once started, it would have been humiliating to turn back.

"A good thing I've left off rouging," she said; "but I'm glad I've got a powder puff in my pocket. After this, a dash of pow-

der will be no more than a concession to decency. Is there any end to this sandy trail?"

It did seem rather endless. They plowed ankle deep through the sucking silt of it, and Anne's was the harder part. She had to bolster up another woman's good spirits for no personal reward to herself. Hilda was the sort who had to be kept up, who might cave in at any moment and stop suddenly and most stubbornly where she dropped.

But she didn't.

Anne's heroic example of going through something which at this stage of the game simply had to be done fired Hilda Margesson with vicarious energy. One needn't go so far as to call it courage.

When they emerged upon the tram lines at the side of the castle, and had only a scant half mile of highroad ahead of them, they sat down for a moment to rest and mop their streaming faces.

"I'm so sorry," said Anne. "I didn't think it would be quite so bad."

"It's been good—for me," Hilda replied, with a depth of reasoning that she did not always display. "One has achieved something. It has pretty nearly killed me, but, funnily enough, I feel more alive than I've ever felt in my life. Oh, how hungry I am! Come on, Anne—don't be a sluggard!"

XXVII

Now that they had almost reached their destination, Anne experienced a chilling sense of fear on her friend's behalf. Suppose Charles Margesson merely turned and walked away when he saw his wife? Hilda had given him great provocation to leave her forever, and so far it would seem that he meant to do so.

Hilda looked so happy at this moment that she made Anne feel unreasonably guilty. The threatened fit of the blues had failed to materialize, and after a surreptitious critical inspection Anne decided that her companion looked ten years younger than she had when they left London. She seemed to have recaptured her girlhood. Would Charles Margesson approve that? Or would he think it more becoming of her to present a tragic appearance?

Recollecting her one brief meeting with him, Anne Cabell had difficulty in deciding exactly what manner of person he might be. Her memory was of a heavily built,

taciturn man, interested only in his dinner and in the particular brand of claret he favored. Might not that taciturnity have represented a reserve bred of disappointment? Disappointed people are frequently silent people.

That Lord Cumberley was his friend, and had risked his own official position to save him from the worst aspect of Hilda's disgrace, argued something on behalf of Charles Margesson.

"That must be our little café," Anne said, pointing to a group of low, white-washed brick buildings half concealed by shrubbery and shadowed by immensely tall trees. The name, *Pré Catalan*, was painted in big black letters on a barn facing the road.

In the courtyard half a dozen motor cars were drawn up, and in the big garden, noted for its quaint flower beds and lawns, people were lunching at little tables set under the shade of gnarled apple and plum trees. Other groups were trailing back from the golf course adjoining.

Anne threw a quick glance at the waiting motors. Wasn't that Peter Cumberley's Rolls-Royce? The chauffeur, however, was not in attendance at the moment, so she couldn't be sure.

"We seem to have hit upon a retreat of the idle rich," said Hilda. "This place is sophisticated, Anne. How did you happen to hear of it?"

Anne replied that somebody had told her.

"It looks expensive," Hilda commented, as she observed the contents of a laden tray that one of the waitresses was carrying out—a tray burdened with gilt-necked bottles and an imposing dish of lobster mayonnaise.

And then, simultaneously, the two young women looked at each other in blank dismay, which culminated finally in suppressed shrieks of hysterical laughter.

"Have you any?" demanded Hilda. "I absolutely forgot it!"

"Not a penny," gasped Anne.

They had both overlooked the necessity for bringing along their purses.

"Oh, and I'm starving!" wailed Hilda. "Do you think the woman would be willing to trust us?"

"I should hate to ask her," said Anne. "It isn't as if we were staying in Hardelot. We might be trippers over from Folkstone for the day."

As she spoke, she glanced around anxiously. Where was Peter Cumberley?

"Couldn't we explain and ask her to send us home in a cart afterward, and we could give the driver the money to bring back to her?"

"My French is so shocking," said Anne.

"Well, dear, it's better than mine. Oh, do try!"

"*Bonjour, mesdames*," sang out the plump, smiling lady of the café, and followed up her salutation by asking if they desired *déjeuner*.

They desired it most fervently, but their giggling, embarrassed efforts to explain their predicament only resulted in puzzling *madame*.

"Yes, yes—I spik Engleesh, no," was her contribution to the discussion.

At that moment some one called to demand her presence in the kitchen, and, with a benevolent smile at the penniless visitors, she vanished into the dim, copper-hung precincts from which came such tantalizing odors.

"This is the limit!" exclaimed Hilda. Her mirth was fast subsiding into ravenous despair. "I'm going to get some food, if I have to steal it. Shall we order lunch and then discover we've no money after we've eaten it?"

Anne Cabell was an adventurous young person, but even her coolness could not rise to such daring. Besides, she hadn't altogether given up hope of Peter Cumberley.

"Let's sit down in the garden for a few moments and think it over," she suggested.

They walked around the side of the house, and, turning the corner, came straight upon Charles Margesson emerging from the golf professional's hut, where, presumably, he had just left his clubs.

"Charles!" shrieked Hilda. "Where on earth did you spring from? Oh, what luck—what blessed luck! Lend me a hundred francs, Charles! Anne and I have walked miles and miles, and we forgot to bring any money with us, and we're simply famished!"

That was probably one of the most awkward moments of Charles Margesson's life. He was utterly taken aback, and his plump face went crimson.

"Wh-what? Why, yes, of course," he stammered, plunging a hand into his breast pocket and bringing out a note case.

"But perhaps you'll invite us to lunch with you—if it's convenient," Hilda said

demurely. "Of course, it may not be convenient. I should hate to make it uncomfortable for you, Charles!"

"What do you mean? There's only Cumberley."

A little belatedly, Mr. Margesson said "How-d'ye-do?" to Anne. Then Peter Cumberley came out of the professional's hut, and gave a good imitation of surprise at this *contretemps*.

"Of course you'll lunch with us," he said hospitably; "or at least with me. Charles can have a table all to himself, if he dislikes the society of beautiful women. By Jove, you two girls do look healthy! What have you been doing with yourselves lately?"

"Leading the simple life," Hilda replied pensively. "You might drive us back after lunch—it's only a few miles—and stay to dinner. Anne and I are getting to be wonderful housekeepers. Oh, Charles, do say yes! It won't compromise you too much. We shall be well chaperoned, you know."

This wasn't the way Anne had expected Hilda to behave on meeting her estranged husband, and it was an agreeable surprise. No matter what mistakes Hilda had made, it would have hurt Anne to see her humiliate herself in the dust, and perhaps be coldly repelled.

Hilda knew her Charles. On the whole, she appeared to pay little attention to him, dividing most of her conversation between Peter Cumberley and Anne; but she darted glances at her husband, and gave him timid, tremulous smiles. To Cumberley it was plain enough that Margesson's hour of capitulation had nearly arrived.

"Ah!" said the plump, bustling lady of the café, coming to give them her personal attention. "Ah, I did not understand! You were waiting for the gentlemen to come back from the golf."

She spoke in her native tongue, but what she said was quite comprehensive to Hilda and Anne. They replied that that was so, and then everybody—even Charles Margesson—laughed. None laughed more boisterously than *madame*, who knew that there was a joke somewhere, although she had missed the fine point of it.

Thus began what proved to be the complete subjugation of Charles Margesson.

Cumberley's Rolls-Royce took them all back to Equihen later on, but Hilda did not

bother to show off her culinary talents that evening. After all, they did possess a competent cook.

Instead, Charles and she scrambled down to the beach, to bathe before dinner, while Anne and Peter Cumberley walked out to the half submerged wreck of a torpedo-boat destroyer, which at low tide was a never failing attraction to sight-seers.

"You think he will forgive her?" Anne asked, looking anxiously into Cumberley's kind, weather-beaten face.

"My child, it's done," he replied with a wistful smile. "He always meant to. It wasn't in Charles Margesson to cast her off."

"She's lucky," said Anne.

"I hope she'll realize that."

"Indeed she will. Hilda wants—well, she wants all the things he wanted, now. Of course, she will always be herself; but that's her charm."

"Yes, Hilda has a great deal of charm," Peter Cumberley agreed. "And you, Anne?"

"What about me?"

"Your charm is quite remarkable, but it's no more use than the light under a bushel. Why hide it?"

"I suppose you mean Dick. Has he been rude to you?"

"Very," Cumberley said dryly.

"I'm so sorry!"

"You're still fond of him?"

The middle-aged man and the young girl exchanged glances which might be described as profound. Anne's eyes told Cumberley something he already knew pretty well, and his made her suspect what he would never put into words now.

It was a divine evening, a full-faced moon rising on the heels of a glowing sunset. Lights began to twinkle from the cottages on the cliff.

"We'd better start back," said Anne.

Cumberley lifted one of her hands, and pressed the slender fingers to his lips. So much he could not help, but he did it with a smile which stripped off sentiment and gave to the act no more than a gallant chivalry.

"Yes, we'd better start back," he agreed. "You must be very tired."

But although Anne returned his smile, he knew that she was not thinking of him. He knew that she was thinking of some one else—some one much younger—and wishing that that younger some one were

here in his place. For Anne's sake, Peter Cumberley wished it, too.

"Why do men only learn kindness when the meridian is crossed?" he thought. "Why must youth be cruel?"

XXVIII

OCTOBER had arrived, and Anne was back in the Boltons, with all the high adventure that had cost her so dearly behind her. At the present moment she employed her leisure with cooking and dressmaking classes, and was most assiduous about it, as she was with anything she took up.

Even now she had not succeeded in the difficult business of pleasing her father. It was something, in his grudging opinion, that Mrs. Margesson seemed to be living down the scandal she had brought upon herself, and that apparently neither Anne's reputation nor her character had suffered greatly through association with that reckless lady; but Timothy could not understand why his daughter found it necessary to receive her instruction in domestic economy abroad rather than at home. Couldn't her mother teach her?

Poor Mrs. Cabell sighed.

"Tim dear, she's so overflowing with life and energy—and she's still so unhappy about Dick! She's got to have something to occupy her time and her mind."

"Humph!" scoffed Anne's father. "And she's still gadding about with that Mrs. Margesson."

"You can scarcely call it 'gadding,'" protested Mrs. Cabell. "The Margessons are buying a place in the country, and Mrs. Margesson is employing Anne to help her with the furniture and decorations."

"She still goes to theaters and restaurants with Cumberley," Timothy said, raking his mind for accusations to hurl at the absent Anne.

A smile trembled on his wife's lips.

"Do you want to lock her up?" she asked.

"Well, after that Stockmar affair, I should think she might want to lock herself up!"

"Oh, Tim, it's time to forget all that! Anne wasn't the only girl who knew Stockmar, and her name was never brought into the affair publicly. We should be thankful it was no worse."

And, indeed, knowing what she did, although not knowing all, Mrs. Cabell was very thankful. Moreover, she saw into the

very heart of Anne's unhappiness in spite of the girl's proud attempt to hide it.

This was the cozy hour of dusk when indoors all is made snug with lamp and firelight, and Anne, coming away from a lesson on pastry making, was walking briskly through St. James's Park on her way to the Underground Station.

The park, retrieved from its wartime ugliness, looked its old picturesque self once more—a place of orange lights, gleaming water, and grassy lawns, the whole dominated by the tall towers of Parliament in the background, and made gay by the glittering front of Buckingham Palace, where a dinner of state was taking place that evening. Anne thought how pleasant London was—and yet it was a place in which one could be intolerably lonely, in spite of fond parents, a good home, and many friends.

For a moment she stopped on the bridge that spans the little lake, interested in the domestic squabbles of the waterfowl making ready to retire for the night. As she stood there, some one spoke her name in a tone of timid surprise.

"Surely it's Anne Cabell! Oh, Anne, I've been longing to see you! I thought perhaps, after your kind letter and the perfectly charming candlesticks you sent me, you had forgiven me."

It was Vera, now Lady Malcolm Chereworth, and recently returned from her honeymoon. Somehow it seemed not only that her voice was softer than it used to be, but that her expression was softer, too, and less self-centered.

"Anne dear, I was a beast to you, but honestly I didn't realize it at the time. I didn't realize what it might have led to."

Anne looked at her doubtfully. How much did Vera know?

"It's all right, Vera," she said kindly. "We needn't say anything more about it."

"Well, perhaps I ought to say a little more. Have you a moment to spare? We've taken a furnished flat in Buckingham Gate until we find the house we want. Cheery's having tea with his fond mamma this afternoon, so I shall be alone. It's only a step from here. Do come back with me, Anne!"

They walked on together, Vera chattering busily and asking all sorts of questions.

Why had Anne left the Justine? Vera and Cheery had spent a merry evening there last night, and everything was much

the same, except that poor Mrs. Margeson never came any more.

"But I hear her husband has forgiven her," Vera added.

It seemed that old Mr. Draper had played a cruel trick on Fleurette Gracey, for when she was expecting at any moment that he would ask her to marry him, he suddenly bestowed himself and his millions on a middle-aged shop assistant. Fleurette was now angling for Patmore, who had no money at all and very poor prospects.

Anne was vaguely interested in this gossip, but it all seemed rather stale and profitless, like the life they had led—the life that was still going on and on, round and round, like squirrels in a cage.

"And what are you doing with yourself these days?" Vera asked, when they had reached her flat and ordered tea.

Anne told her about the domestic science classes.

"Oh, yes! Of course you'll be getting married pretty soon. Has Dick got his appointment?"

Anne bit her lip and looked away with blinking eyes.

"No—yes, he could have had it. We're not going to be married at all."

"Good Heavens!" Vera thought rapidly. "You know—or perhaps you didn't know—a man came to see me—that big pot at the F. O.—Cumberley. He came to ask me about my letters to Stockmar, which he said had been destroyed. Of course I know who destroyed them. It was you, although Lord Cumberley didn't mention your name, except to say that I was not to give any further information about you to anybody, or I'd land myself into serious trouble. Oh, Anne, he was so severe! He almost frightened me to death. Was it on my account that—that you and Dick quarreled?"

Anne sat miserably silent. What was the good, now, of raking up the thing that had spoiled her life?

Vera took her by the shoulders.

"I know it was," she said, her voice shaking tearfully. "I bought my own happiness at the price of yours. Oh, Anne, I was more of a beast than I thought! Something must be done, and at once. Either you must go to Dick and tell him the truth, or I will. Yes, you may tell him that you went there for my sake—I don't care. Even if Cheery gets to know—which he won't—I don't care. The letters have

been burned, thanks to you, so he could never know the silly, mawkish things I wrote to that Brazilian horror."

"It's very kind of you," Anne said, "but I would take it as a favor if you said nothing to Dick. You see, I—I wouldn't want him back in just that way. I wouldn't want him back if he didn't believe in me in spite of the strongest evidence."

"Oh, but that's expecting too much of any man!" exclaimed the more worldly Vera.

"It's the way I feel. All the same, thank you very much. I'm happier for what you've said. For all I was so angry with you at the time, it hurt, and I've always been sorry I said I never wanted to see you again."

Vera began to cry.

"You may be happier, Anne, but I'm perfectly wretched—and I deserve to be!" she said.

Anne left Buckingham Gate feeling curiously light-hearted. Vera had restored her faith in human nature.

Of course, the mere fact of becoming Lady Malcolm Chereworth had not turned Vera Gordon into an angel, but it had certainly made her less selfish. She was genuinely fond of her good-natured Cheery, and Anne realized what a blow it would have been to lose him. Yet, knowing Cheery, it was scarcely likely that Vera would have lost him at all had he been told about those letters. Cheery was the sort of man who would have gone to Stockmar and said:

"Now you hand over Miss Gordon's correspondence this minute, or take the worst hiding you've ever had in your life!"

Having got the letters, he would have come back to Vera and told her:

"Here you are, old girl. It's all right, but don't do it again, or I shall be rather annoyed with you."

That would have been Cheery's way of handling such an affair. He was fond of Vera, too, but Anne felt that there had never been that tempestuous young passion between them which had characterized her and Dick's romance.

Anne knew now that she had it in her to be fiercely jealous of Dick; but he had never made it necessary for her to exercise that emotion, and so she had never realized his feeling on the same score. Her work as a professional ballroom dancer had seemed harmless enough until the Stock-

mar affair. She liked the money it brought her; but she saw now that money hadn't been all of it, by any means. Every vocation must carry with it certain personal associations, varying in degree, perhaps, but none the less important.

Danger all along the line. Anne's safety, where Bernard Stockmar was concerned, lay in the fact that his personality had repelled her, while she had not possessed sufficient wealth to rouse his cupidity.

She arrived home that evening glowing with the news of her encounter with Vera, and was so charming to her father that he decided to forgive her for not turning up at tea time.

"Humph!" he observed, as she perched on the arm of his chair and begged him to give her the experiment of a whiff from his pipe. "I guess there isn't much you don't know about smoking!"

"Oh, yes, there is! I've given up cigarettes; but your pipe smells awfully nice, daddy."

"Ask your mother about that."

Mrs. Cabell glanced at her dainty net window curtains, and sighed.

"I don't mind anything so long as you're happy, Tim," she said.

"What a model wife!" exclaimed Anne.

"If I'd gone further, I'd have fared worse," said Timothy. "You wouldn't do badly if you took a leaf out of your mother's book, too."

"I'm trying to, daddy," Anne said demurely; "only I think it's a terrible mistake to spoil men too much. Makes 'em grumpy—and the more one gives them, the more they want."

"How did you learn all that, my girl?"

"By observation—in the home," Anne replied smartly.

Timothy Cabell grinned. Anne had completely restored his good humor.

"But what you've yet to learn, my girl, is that women like a grumpy man around the house. Gives 'em a peg to hang a grievance on."

Mrs. Cabell suspended her sewing and looked blankly at her husband.

"Why, Tim, I shouldn't call you exactly grumpy," she said in astonishment.

Timothy shook with laughter. There was nothing he enjoyed more than getting a rise out of Emmie. Anne laughed, too, but Mrs. Cabell looked slightly annoyed. Father and daughter often found things to laugh at which puzzled her—at least, they

had so amused themselves in the old days. Well, she wouldn't be sorry if the old days came back again—the days before her husband started his eternal criticism of Anne. He had spoiled Anne as much as anybody else, and then, when trouble came, he wouldn't take any of the blame for it.

The doorbell rang, and all three of them started in that questioning, apprehensive way that families have when they are not expecting anybody in particular. Mrs. Cabell was not by nature spontaneously hospitable, except to intimates, although she made a delightful hostess if prepared for it.

"Oh, I do hope—" she murmured.

Anne and her father pretty well knew what it was she hoped, but the parlor maid interrupted the full expression of it.

"Mr. Farnham, ma'am. Mr. Farnham wants to know if it would be convenient for him to see Miss Anne for a moment."

Mary spoke self-consciously, for she was aware of the fact that there had been a serious rift in the lovers' lute.

Before Anne could reply, her father answered for her:

"By all means. Show Mr. Farnham in. Emmie, I want you in the den, to go over the accounts. I'm thinking of increasing the housekeeping allowance, if figures warrant it."

"Well, I think I can show you that they do," Mrs. Cabell replied, rising with alacrity to this tempting bait.

Anne was left stranded. She was angry, and wanted to be shrill about it, but Dick mustn't know that she felt anything but indifference. What was his object in coming here, anyhow?

He came in with that familiar quick stride which always seemed to bring up with a rush, as if he had to check his own impetuosity.

"Anne, it was good of you to see me!" he began.

"I didn't say I'd see you," she replied coolly. "It was daddy. He didn't give me a chance to say one way or another. He just took for granted that I'd be honored and pleased and—and grateful," Anne finished, a little breathlessly.

She didn't want to look at Dick. He was so grave and white—so very tense and tragic, as always when he imagined himself to be facing a crisis. Dick would always face a crisis, however unimportant, as if the end of the world was at hand.

"Anne, I've just had some news," he said.

She waved him aside with an unsteady laugh.

"Don't I know what that news is?" she cried.

"I—I can scarcely believe you do," he replied, starting as if she had slapped him hard in the face.

"Oh, but I do! Vera has got hold of you in some sort of way—she must have been pretty quick about it—and started the whitewashing process. Well, if I wasn't good enough for you without *that*, Mr. Farnham, I'm still not good enough. Or perhaps you only came to apologize. That's decent, but I'll think it over. Oh, yes, one must always accept apologies, I suppose. That's only decent, too—although one may feel that an apology is an awfully easy way out of things for some people."

Hot, bitter words, indeed—but Anne scarcely knew what she was saying. Such an incoherent gush could come only from a sadly damaged heart—a heart all peppered with little holes, which suddenly joined into rifts and let out the full strength of its misery.

Dick's fine, tortured face expressed the utmost bewilderment.

"Vera?" he said. "I haven't seen Vera for months."

"Well, your boarding house is on the telephone, isn't it?" Anne inquired.

"Yes, it is."

"So she rang you up!"

"I don't know what you're talking about. Lady Malcolm and I never hit it off very well, and why she should suddenly ring me up I can't imagine."

Anne stared at him.

"Is that true?" she demanded.

"I'm not a liar, Anne."

"Then who told you? Was it Lord Cumberley?"

"I haven't the faintest idea what you mean!" Dick cried.

"Then why have you come here? To hurt me all over again? Was that necessary, Dick?"

She was looking into his eyes, much against her will—those peculiarly tortured eyes of his.

"Tell me, Dick! I know something has happened."

The angry bitterness dropped from her voice, although she was unaware of it. She was conscious of feeling sorry for him—

vaguely conscious that in some curious way he and she still had a share in each other's lives.

"Yes," he said, "something has happened. I've just had a telegram telling me that my mother has died. It—it dazed me. I didn't even know she had been ill. The first thing I did was to read her last letter over again. You see, I hadn't told her that you and I—that all was off. I hadn't told her that I'd turned down the Indian appointment. She wouldn't have understood. Anne, forgive me, dear! I'm so lonely! I'm so miserable! Perhaps you can't forgive me, but you'll let me sit here for a little while, won't you? I don't feel quite myself. I'm still dazed. Perhaps, if I had a talk with your father, it would help me a little. There's no train I can take until to-morrow morning. I missed the evening one by five minutes. You know mother lived with her sister in Devonshire."

"Oh, Dick! Oh, Dick!" moaned Anne.

She thought of all the cruel, bitter things she had just hurled at him, and shuddered; but apparently he hadn't taken in the full cruelty of them.

Beyond all doubt he was dazed.

"This place has seemed like home to me," he said confusedly; "and I've always thought of you as my wife. Of course, that was just make-believe; but I love you so much, Anne! There'll never be any other girl in my life, if I live to be a thousand—and that's not likely."

Anne put her arms around his neck and drew his face down to meet hers.

"Did I ever in this world love any one but you?" she whispered. "Oh, my poor, poor boy!"

A pang shot through her. Dick had lost his mother.

He might have married, and gone out to India to spend most of his days there. Still, there would have been a long leave at the end of every two or three years of service, and the knowledge that the frail, loving little mother was waiting for him and his wife, planning for their infrequent but lengthy visits, just as Timothy and Emmie Cabell would have planned.

It seemed that Anne had rushed into Dick's arms. If that was undignified, she didn't think about it. You can't stand on your dignity when you're aching all over.

Anne thought of Hilda Margesson. That was how Hilda had felt about her Charles—willing to be a doormat.

"My Dick! My poor, poor Dick!" she said again, in that sweetly whispered, almost strangled voice.

Her wet face pressed against his.

Dick and Anne were married on Christmas Day.

As she came down the aisle, her hand on her husband's arm, she looked into the friendly, smiling faces of those who all loved her so well, and smiled back at them with sweet gravity. The wedding had been very quiet, because of Dick's recent bereavement, and only those were invited who meant something in the lives of the young couple.

The reunited Margessons — there were tears in Hilda's smile; Cheery and Vera; Dick's little aunt from Devonshire, and some cousins; a few girl friends of Anne's — but it was Peter Cumberley's face that she remembered afterward. In the days which were yet to come she often thought of his smile. She could never forget the man who had been her good fairy all through that time of deep trouble. Even Dick was fond of Cumberley now, and had

forgiven him the car with the two-thousand-guinea look.

Very likely Dick didn't suspect what Anne discovered on her wedding day—that Peter Cumberley loved her. She had suspected it that evening on the sands at Equihen, but as she came so happily down the aisle of the church on her wedding day she knew it for a certainty, and only then did she realize the full depth of Cumberley's unselfishness.

It wasn't going to be easy, this new life of hers. Dick was a difficult person to deal with—like her father, thought Anne—and she was a difficult person, too; but they had both learned what it would mean if they lost each other, and they had learned it while there was time to profit by the hard lesson.

With her hand on her husband's arm, Anne knew that come what would in this uncertain world—hard work, hard times, pain or poverty—nothing but death itself could have the power ever again to separate her from Dick.

Her fingers tightened, and he pressed her hand against his heart.

THE END

YOUR GIFT

You said a light good-by,

And you were gone;

But, secretly,

Through all these smiling years

I have kept and shall keep,

Till life is done,

Your gift, my dear, my dear—

Your gift of tears!

Roselle Mercier Montgomery

Established
1860

*A Shade is only
as good as its Roller*

WINDOW
SHADE
FABRICS

Hartshorn

SHADE ROLLERS

are the best that money can buy